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OR,

The Bad Man of White Hoss.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE DIAMOND SPORT," "CAPTAIN
MYSTERY," "DAISY DARE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGER IN WHITE HOSS.

THE regular stage from Blue Nose brought a single passenger to White Hoss.

At the driver's rough command to "pile out," a well-dressed, fine-appearing middle-aged gentleman stepped down from the stage and ascended the steps of the only hotel in the camp.

The new-comer entered the office, and at once registered on the book that was used for that purpose. Then he asked to be shown to a room.

"BOMBSHELL, THESE KIDS ARE LUCKY LUKE AND HIS BAND OF INDEPENDENT RANGERS."

When he had left the bar-room, one of the loungers present approached the register and curiously spelled out the stranger's autograph, which was written in a running, business-like hand.

"What's his handle, Bill?" asked a companion, who evidently could not read or was too lazy to leave his chair and walk up to the register.

"Dayton Snare," replied the one addressed. "Reckon he's some big gun by his appearance."

"Appearances are oftentimes deceptive," quoth another, from behind a cloud of tobacco-smoke. "He may be a *snare* and a delusion. But did you get onto that b'iled shirt?"

"Bet yer boots; an' thet plug hat!"

"He was togged out rayther loud, but ther question is, has he got ther rocks ter back it?"

The stranger did not leave his room until the evening was well advanced. Then he descended the stairs, turned to the right, and entered the gambling apartment of the hotel.

His entrance attracted but little attention, for the room was well-filled with a motley assembly of miners, prospectors, hunters, cowboys and roughs and toughs in general. The gambling-tables occupied the center of the room and were well taken up. Surrounded by an eager throng of players and spectators, a faro lay-out was doing a thriving business. A little three-handed game of draw-poker was attracting considerable attention, to judge by the number of lookers-on. Everything was moving smoothly in that part of the room.

At one end of the long "saloon" was a bar, over which liquid refreshments were constantly passing.

At the other end was a curtained stage, making it evident that the proprietor added to the attractions of the place by amusing the throng with an entertainment of some kind. When the stage was not in use, the curtains were closely drawn, concealing it from view.

At one glance, Dayton Snare seemed to note everything of importance in the place; at the same time his eyes fell upon an unoccupied card-table that stood a little apart from the others, and toward this he made his way.

Seating himself at the table, the new-comer in White Hoss drew forth a cigar, and lighting it, settled back for a comfortable smoke while glanced idly around. Although evidently not a Western man, yet it was apparent that he was not unaccustomed to scenes similar to the one now witnessed.

Over by the bar a red-shirted, bewhiskered fellow was prancing around and indulging in a large amount of "wind," much to the amusement of some of the spectators and the disgust of others.

"Whoop 'er up, Sary Jane!" he shouted. "Hyer I be, jist down from the highlan's. Slap yer peepers onto me, Tough Tom, ther Terror from Tall Timber! I kin lick my weight in wild-cats an' chaw up ten times my weight in grizzlies. I'm a bad man ter crowd, an' don't ye fergit it."

"Say—*you*," and the bartender pointed one long, white finger at the blatant "Terror," "You can either *dry up* or *go out*! You are disturbing those present by your brawling."

Tough Tom glared at the bartender a moment in open-mouthed surprise, then managed to gasp:

"Did yer speak ter me?"

"Waal, I should remark that I *did*" affirmed the barkeeper.

"W'ot ye say?"

"You heard what I said—dry up or go out."

"Waal, I sw'ar! It can't be that ye know me, young feller. I'm Tough Tom, ther Terror from Tall Timber. I've killed mor'n a dozen men fur givin' me half as much sass as you've fired off. I'm sorry, sonny, but I've got to—"

"*Dry up!*" and a revolver gleamed in the barkeeper's hand. "Keep your fingers away from yer shooter, or I shall be forced to tunnel you."

The red-shirt was fearfully taken aback as the little man behind the bar brought the weapon to a dead level.

"Hold on! hold on!" he cried. "None o' thet! Can't ye stan' a little fun without yankin' out a gun in thet way?"

"Will you keep still?"

"To be course I will! Put up yer shooter, man. I don't want to fight." As the barkeeper lowered the weapon, Tough Tom added: "I sh'd hate like sin to hav' ter shoot a kid, like you."

"Put a stopper in your fly-trap and keep it corked!" observed the barkeeper. "I'm not in

the mood for fooling, and I shall use lead to cool you off next time."

The "Terror" sneaked away to another part of the room and subsided.

Dayton Snare, watching this little scene, had not noticed a dark-attired man who had quietly seated himself at the table, and who now nodded curtly, and, leaning forward a trifle, asked:

"Stranger in camp? Came in on the afternoon bearse, I take it?"

Snare deliberately surveyed the inquirer. He did not like this familiarity.

The stranger was a compactly-built, medium-sized man dressed in dark clothes, and wore a white shirt; his face was beardless, and to Snare it seemed strangely familiar.

"Yes, I am a stranger here," Snare admitted; "and I did come in on the stage this afternoon. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Well," the other drawled, "that depends. If you are looking after an *investment*, we may be able to transact a little business. I own a good share in one of the best paying mines in White Hoss."

"But, I am *not* on that lay," Snare declared. "I am on different business entirely."

"Pardon me," and the stranger spoke a little more briskly. "Would it be taking too much liberty to ask your name?"

"Oh, no! not at all," laughed the other, with just a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "My name is Dayton Snare."

"Snare? Snare? That's an odd name. Did you ever know a Cyrus Crafton?"

Snare started as though shot, and turned deadly pale, as he gasped:

"Crafton! Craft—! Who in sin's name are you?"

"Waal, I'm known here as Bryton Gaines, but, there was a time in the long ago when I acknowledged the name of—*Ralph Roberts!*"

With a half-smothered curse of surprise, Snare leaped to his feet, his hand flying back toward his hip-pocket.

CHAPTER II.

RAKING UP THE PAST.

"OH, come now!" drawled Gaines, as a revolver suddenly appeared in his hand with the muzzle bearing full upon the other. "It is decidedly dangerous to carry your handkerchief in your hip-pocket in this part of the country, for when you attempt to draw it, your motive is apt to be misconstrued. If you want a rag, take mine, but keep your hand away from your pocket," and the cool speaker tossed a snow-white cambric handkerchief on the table, at the same time carefully keeping Snare covered.

For a moment Snare stood as though undecided whether to attempt to draw and take his chances, or to let this man, whom he now recognized as a deadly foe, hold his life in his hands, subject to any impulse that might seize him. Then the Easterner seemed to become aware of the utter folly of making such a rash attempt, and sunk back into his seat.

For a full minute the two foes scanned each other, one with features on which rested a look of baffled rage, the other with a sneering, malignant smile curling his beardless lip.

Finally Snare spoke, in low tones:

"You have the drop, Ralph Roberts. Give me a fair show and one of us will eat lead."

The beardless man laughed, tauntingly, as he retorted:

"You must think me a fool. A score of times I have sworn to kill you, and now that I have your life in my hands, do you think I will lose my grip? Keep your seat, Dayton Snare, as you now call yourself. There is no need of making a row and attracting attention."

"What do you want of me?" Snare demanded.

"Want? Why, I want to talk over old times. We have not met before for many years, and it is but natural that I should wish to speak of those days we were bosom friends, one and inseparable."

A look of pain flitted over the Easterner's face.

"The past is dead," he said, sadly. "Why not let it rest in its grave? It can be no pleasure to recall your own treachery to one who once regarded you as his dearest friend."

A sneering laugh, as the answer came:

"You are a tender chicken, Cyrus Crafton. It's a wonder you have not died of softening of the heart long ere this."

Words that at once restored Dayton Snare's composure for he became as self-possessed as the man who toyed with the gold-mounted revolver which he held.

"Go on with your sport, Ralph Roberts, if

you like it. It is evident you have not lost your desire to hear yourself talk. I suppose I may as well waste my time here as anywhere."

"Which shows that you have not yet lost all your wisdom," smiled Gaines. "Or, perhaps, this little toy has something to do with your sensible conclusion. Be that as it may, we will proceed to proceed. It has been a long day since we two enjoyed a social chat—a long day—a good twenty—"

"You are wasting time and breath," Snare interpolated. "If you have any thing in particular to say to me, come to the point at once."

"Don't rush a man. You always were in a hurry. I will come to the point soon enough. I want to touch up your memory of the happenings in the little New England town of Amesburg, something over twenty years ago. At that time you were Cashier of the Amesburg First National Bank. I reckon you remember, Cyrus?"

The speaker paused as though for a reply, but if he expected such, he was disappointed, for Snare sat mute.

"My father was president of the bank, and you and I were firm friends. We were not only friends, but in an open, manly way were rivals for the hand of Amesburg's fairest belle, handsome Vivian Parks. I fancy that her smiles were pretty evenly divided between us for a time—"

"Evenly divided—yes!" broke in the other. "They were until you showed yourself in your true character—a treacherous snake!"

"You are interrupting me, Cyrus," observed Gaines, quite unruffled. "If you are in such haste for me to come to a point, don't break the course of the little story again."

"To continue: A sudden discrepancy was found in the bank's books, of which you had charge. Further investigation showed several of these discrepancies, but all so carefully hidden that it took an expert to find them. Then a startling revelation was made. The bank had been secretly robbed, not only once but several times. Various sums, ranging from one hundred to five hundred dollars, had been taken. These thefts had been performed so adroitly that no one had suspected them until the discrepancies in the books were brought to light. There was little question as to the identity of the guilty party. With as little delay as possible you were put under arrest, Cyrus, charged with robbing the Amesburg Bank!"

"It was a foul plot—a conspiracy!" hoarsely declared the Easterner. "And *you* were at the bottom of it all, you villain!"

"Yes, I believe such a charge was made against me, at the time," admitted the smooth-faced man, as he picked up and restored to his pocket the handkerchief which he had tossed on the table. "But, at the same time, it was shown that you had several times sent away money for unknown purposes, and had it not been for the meddling of one of the bank directors, the crime would have been fastened upon you and you would have had to pay the penalty. As it was, I soon found myself in a tight corner. A detective was engaged to look over my trail for a few months previous. The result was that it became necessary for me to leave for other parts."

"You would not have escaped thus easily, Ralph Roberts, had I not added my entreaties for leniency to those of your father. The poor old man was nearly heart-broken at the shame and disgrace which had fallen upon him. He willingly restored to the bank a sum equal to the amount stolen, on condition that you should be allowed to escape."

"A foolish move, as I look at it now," said the Westerner. "It was a clever device to throw the crime from your shoulders to mine, skillfully worked out by the detective in your employ. No doubt he was well-paid for his successful plotting. You were guilty and I innocent, yet you managed to fasten the crime upon me. I have always regretted that I allowed my father to settle the affair. If I had brought it to the death, I am quite sure that your rascality would have been exposed."

Snare's face became livid with passion.

"You miserable scoundrel!" he hissed, his fingers working as though they burned to clutch his foe's throat. "You know you were guilty of a most dastardly attempt to fasten your own crime on me! You know it! Yet you still pretend to believe that I robbed the Amesburg Bank. You sought to disgrace me in the eyes of Vivian Parks, and your foul attempt proved a boomerang that caused your own overthrow."

Gaines waved his left hand with a deprecatory motion.

"Now don't get excited, Cyrus," with a sneering smile. "Keep yourself calm and collected. I am willing to admit that the game ran directly into your hands, for, after I was forced to leave Amesburg in disgrace, you had an open field. More bitter than my disgrace was the knowledge that you would probably woo and win Vivian Parks for your wife. I reckon you remember my warning ere I departed. I swore that if ever I knew of trouble or sorrow coming to Vivian, through you, I would have your worthless life!"

The speaker leaned forward and for a moment glared into the eyes of the man whom he was addressing. There was a world of hatred and malice in that one look.

"Six months after my departure you and Vivian Parks were married. Although I had been expecting such an event the news of its occurrence nearly killed me. I was desperately in love with Vivian, and the knowledge that she was another's—lost to me forever—was maddening. I sought to find forgetfulness in a foreign country. In Italy no news reached me of my lost love. Some years later, I returned, and then it was that I was horrified by the terrible story which came to my ears.

"Vivian was dead! Within a few months after your marriage, there had been a quarrel between husband and wife, and you had driven her from your door. A few weeks later the dead body of a woman, found floating in Boston Harbor, had been identified by yourself and others as that of your wife. The body was brought to Amesburg and buried in the little country cemetery. Then you disappeared, and no one knew whether you had gone.

"In disguise I went to Amesburg. I stood beside Vivian's grave, and it seemed that all the good in my heart was buried with her whom I loved so dearly. Nothing was left but bitterness and wickedness. I swore that if ever I met you face to face, Cyrus Crafton, your life should pay for Vivian's sorrow and death. That was many years ago. To-night, for the first time, we meet. And now, Cyrus Crafton, what have you to say why I should not fulfill my vow by ending your worthless life?"

CHAPTER III.

THE BOY RANGERS.

In a sheltered nook within a sequestered valley, a camp-fire was brightly burning. Around the fire were seated seven persons, six of whom were yet boys in years. The seventh individual was a man, six feet tall, roughly-attired and rugged-appearing. He wore a thick black beard, which almost entirely concealed the cut of his features. His eyes were dark and piercing.

The youths composed a band of boy rangers and prospectors, their leader being an open-faced, jolly-looking young fellow of twenty, who was known to his followers as Lucky Luke, or Captain Luke. The boys were all American lads with a single exception, a little coal-black, red-headed negro. Peter Payson was the darky's true name, but his companions had nicknamed him Firetop, on account of his extraordinary red hair.

The others were named respectively Bob Swett, Ned Pepper, Tom Dole and Happy Joe Cobb. Swett and Pepper were both eighteen, and were chums. Dole was a year younger, but was a perfect giant in stature, standing more than six feet high and weighing nearly two hundred pounds. Happy Joe's age was not known to himself or others. The boys had given him the name of Happy Joe from the fact that he was a long-faced, sorrowful-appearing chap. Happy Joe was tall and lank, in direct contrast to Bob Swett, who was short and fat.

The boys were lounging about the fire in various attitudes, talking and laughing. Happy Joe was industriously engaged in pulling away at a clay pipe, doing considerable work, but making a very small amount of smoke.

"Hang to it, Joe!" laughed Bob Swett, as he watched Joe's efforts with considerable amusement. "Make the old thing testify if it takes the soles off your boots."

"She won't work—she never duz!" whined Joe, between his puffs. "Tain't any wonder thet my system's all outer kilter when I hev ter wrastle with this kondemned ole pipe. Seems so it'd turn my liver wrong eend up every time I pull."

"You ought to have a drawing-plaster on the back of your neck," observed Tom Dole, with a lazy, good-natured grin.

"I reckon this pipe'd knock out a plaster in thet fust round, unless thet plaster c'd pull skil to a pair o' cattle."

"Oh, ye'r losin' yer courage, Joe," put in

Ned Pepper. "Never give up; die at yer post!"

"You shet up!" exclaimed Joe petulantly. "You're allus givin' advice."

At this all the boys joined in a chorus of laughter. The stranger alone sat moody and silent, gazing thoughtfully into the fire. Lucky Luke was secretly watching this visitor in camp.

"Boys," the man finally said, "ye may hev wondered how I kem ter be wanderin' round through these hills weaponless an' hafe starved till I struck this camp ter-nite an' got a good square meal. I'll tell ye. Yer see it war jest four days ago prezactly thet I, Buck Dolan, left Blue Nose with a good mining outfit and thorough good hoss under me. I war bound on a prospectin' trip, an' I fancied I smelled yaller up this way. I follered my nose, an' last night I camped in a canyon a good stretch from hyer. I war jest surroundin' my night fodder when, into my camp, marched eight fellers with masks over their faces an' revolvers in their han's. It didn't take them long to make themselves known. They were Lieutenant Blizzard and a detachment o' Cap'n Cyclone's Road Riders. They at once made their business known, an' I tell ye, boys, when they got through wi' me, there wasn't much o' anything of value left in my possession. I war obleeged ter camp beneath the stars las' night without even a blanket ter kiver me. This mornin' I struck out fer White Hoss, but I reckon I lost my bearin's an' wandered out o' the way. Jest at dark I sighted your camp-fire an'—"

"Hullo, the camp!" hailed a deep voice.

In an instant every boy was on his feet, weapons in hand.

"Who hails?" demanded Lucky Luke.

"An antidiluviated old sinner w'ot spied the glim o' yer fire," came the reply. "Keerful, b'ys, an' not perforate thet ole man, fer he's cumin', han's up an' empty."

Out of the darkness advanced a tall, muscular man who held his empty hands above his head, and wore a good-natured smile on his brown-bearded face. He was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, and appeared like a hunter or scout. From beneath his wide-brimmed hat down upon his shoulders fell a lion-like mane of brown hair. A belt around his waist contained weapons and cartridges.

"Evenin', kids!" saluted the stranger, with a nod. "You've got a cosey-lookin' camp hyer, by ther Roman gods!"

"Who are you, partner?" demanded Luke, bluntly.

"Me? Why, ghost o' ther Pan Handle! don't you fellers know me? I'm known frum ocean to ocean an' frum the north pole to more as nine thousand miles below Mason and Dixon's clothes-line. Don't know me! Waal, I be blowed! It beats me how such condemned ignorance can exist in our free an' enlightened lan'."

"But that doesn't answer my question," persisted Captain Luke.

"Prezactly," admitted the stranger. "Waal, b'ys, I'm a Lizbon yarthquake on trucks an' I usually come to dinner when called by the handle of Ole Bumshell. Sum folks tack a supplement onto my name an' call me thet Bo'der Boomerang."

Tom Dole sprung forward with outstretched hand.

"Old Bombshell!" he exclaimed, with delight. "Put it there! Know ye? Well, I never set eyes on your face before, but I feel as though I had known ye all my life. Your reputation has preceded you."

The two clasped hands warmly.

"Waal, hyer's my fist, young feller, an' ef I do say it, you ain't no dwa'f. It does me proud to grab yer flapper."

"Boys," said Tom, turning to his companions, "this old sinner is the most cantankerous old tramp and Injun exterminator in existence. Bombshell, these kids are Lucky Luke and his band of indepeudent rangers, miners, prospectors, and so forth."

One by one, Captain Luke leading, the boys advanced and shook hands with the eccentric Border Boomerang. Old Bombshell had a hearty grip and a jovial word for all. Buck Dolan, the prospector, however, sat silently, gazing away into the shadows, with a half-averted face. Old Bombshell cast one brief glance at the man, but made no comment.

The boys once more seated themselves around the fire, with Old Bombshell in their midst. The old man scanned the lads' faces with evident delight.

"By ther cock-eyed Roman gods!" he exclaimed, heartily, "this are ther most eternally jolly set o' young larks as I ever did meet."

"Reckon ye hain't tuck er fa'r squint at this child's phiz," observed Ned Pepper, pointing at Happy Joe, who was still struggling with the obstinate pipe.

Joe fired up in an instant.

"I reckon my mug looks as well as yourn," he snapped. "You're hurmbly as er hedge fence run across a stump pasture. Ef ye only hed Firetop's red head, you'd scare ther hair off a brass monkey!"

"Hole on dere," put in the darky. "Don' ye go fo' ter make any sinervations 'bout dis here wool ob mine. I's drefful sens'tive 'bout dat afo'e strangers."

Pete's words and his comical look of wrath caused a fresh outburst of laughter from the boys. It had partially subsided when Old Bombshell suddenly sprung to his feet, with one hand uplifted, commanding silence.

The deep but distant bark of a dog came faintly to their ears.

"It's ole Lion, my purp!" announced Bombshell. "I left him to watch my hoss an' rifle. Sunthin's bruck loose, by ther Roman gods!"

With one bound the Border Boomerang disappeared in the darkness. The boys sat still, listening to the occasional bark of the dog that came to their ears on the faint breeze. Finally the sounds subsided entirely.

"Wonder what caused Old Bombshell's dog to break loose?" queried Bob Swett, still straining his ears, half expecting to hear the rattle of firearms.

Buck Dolan arose to his feet.

"Boys," he said, impressively, "thet ole fraud wasn't any Ole Bumshell any more than I be. I'm redy to stake my life thet he are Lieutenant Blizzard, o' Cap'n Cyclone's Road Riders!"

CHAPTER IV.

A SHARP BATTLE.

To say that the Boy Rangers were surprised at Buck Dolan's astonishing assertion would be expressing it mildly. With the exception of Tom Dole, the boys sprung to their feet, with their hands on their weapons. Tom rolled over and stared at the prospector with a look of lazy incredulity.

"What's that you say, man?" demanded Luke, sharply.

"I say thet I am willin' ter bet my life thet that thar ole varmint is Lieutenant Blizzard, o' Cap'n Cyclone's Road Riders," repeated Dolan, firmly.

"What proof have you—what makes you think so?"

"Don't know as I hev any proof," the man admitted; "but I recognized his voice ther minute I heard it."

"That is mighty poor evidence. There are hundreds of men in the world whose voices sound almost exactly alike."

"Thet may be so," doggedly; "but I know I hain't off my nut on thist bisnis. Lieutenant Blizzard war masked when he drapped in wi' sum o' his chums ter make me a call las' nite, but he war jest erbout sech a built 'coon ez this galoot ez calls hisself Ole Bumshell. Their voices sound prezactly alike."

"Still you must be mistaken," insisted Captain Luke.

"If you want to bet anything that Old Bombshell is Lieutenant Blizzard," interposed Tom Dole, half-rising on one elbow, "I'll stake my farm in kingdom come against you. I have heard of this Old Bombshell before. He is clean white, but worse than a pestilence among evil-doers."

"Yer say ye never saw this Ole Bumshell," said Dolan; "leastwise, thet's w'ot ye admitted ter him. How der yer know but what this ole 'coon is palmin' hisself off fur sumbuddy else?"

Before this question could be answered, a dark form advanced softly from out of the shadows. With some surprise the boys saw before them a little, stoop-shouldered man, who was dressed in a seedy dark suit, and wore spectacles.

Dolan did not notice the stranger till he felt a hand upon his shoulder and glanced around to see the muzzle of a revolver frowning upon him, within ten inches of his face.

"Evenin', Benjamin!" saluted the spectacled stranger. "What kind o' a fish-story war you givin' these children?"

Buck shrunk back with a cry of alarm, his face turning ghastly pale.

"Good Land!" he gasped. "Little Dan Nubs!"

"Yes, thet's my handle, Benny," admitted the stranger, with a quiet smile. "I see yer mem'ry is yet good."

"But, you are dead—dead as Moses!"

"Am I?" with a soft laugh. "If I am, I'm

ther liveliest dead man ever you saw. No, Benjamin, I'm not defunct, although it's no fault o' yourn that I'm not toes up to the daisies. You have dun yer best ter dispose o' Dan Nubs, but ther ole man's got more lives nor a cat. You warn't built ter snuff out my candle, my lad; but I reckon I'll hav' ther pleasure o' helpin' you to a hemp necktie."

"How did you escape?" asked Dolan, regaining his composure in a measure. "You devil! I saw you lyin' dead at my feet wi' er bullet-hole in ther center o' yer forehead."

"It makes little difference *how* I escaped. I am here to make you my prisoner. Up with your hands, Ben Breeze!"

"Wot ef I refuse?"

"I shall have to lay you out."

A whistle, seemingly of derision, burst from Buck Dolan's lips.

"What do you mean by thet?" demanded the spectated stranger, suspiciously. "War thet a signal? If I thought so, by the pride o' Solomon, I'd shoot ye where ye stand!"

Buck Dolan laughed defiantly.

"Shoot nothin'" he sneered. "You hav' escaped death twicet, Dan Nubs; ther third time cocks yer hash, *sure*. Ye kem hyer ter take me pris'ner, but even now you are under ther gun muzzles o' Cap'n Cyclone's Road Riders, an' if ye play crooked ye'll fall filled full o' lead. Cum on, boys!"

Out of the darkness advanced half-a-score of dark forms, who held cocked and leveled revolvers in their hands. Every man wore a black mask over his face. The Boy Rangers suddenly found themselves taken at a disadvantage.

"Ho! ho!" laughed the assumed Buck Dolan.

"Ha! ha! Really this are ther best ole joke I ever struck. Ye kem hyer ter take Ben Breeze pris'ner, did ye, Little Dan? Never dreamed ye war walkin' inter a hornets' nest, did ye? Didn't think ye'd git raked in yerself, did ye? Waal, by gum! this ar' a jolly go, I swear!"

"Shades o' Solomon!" was all that the spectated stranger could say.

As for the boys they were dreadfully surprised. They were all caught without a weapon in their hands.

"As for these kids," continued the pseudo-prospecter, "I'm much obleeged ter them fer my supper, though I hed ter crowd a big sheer o' it down ter make 'em beleve I wuz hafe starved. I reckon I *did* play thet little game in fine style."

"Who are you, anyway?" Captain Luke demanded.

"Who am I? Waal, mer lad, I've sailed under a different name fur every different lan'. This feller wi' ther spectacles hyer w'd tell ye as I war Bill Breeze, a professional bard case. Ef ye ax them boys thar vi' ther rags over ther han'sum mugs, they'd tell ye as how my name war *Lieutenant Blizzard*, o' Cap'n Cyclone's jolly Riders."

"Which proves that you are a miserable fraud and a villain," remarked Tom Dole, from where he still lay stretched on his side. "I thought so all along, but wasn't *sure* of it."

"Well, what do you want here, anyway?" Luke demanded.

"Our'iginal idee war ter skin you babies out o' yer traps an' loose chink an' take you in, Cap'n Luke, fer our chief's inspection; but it happens thet bigger game hes drapped inter our han's in ther shape o' this little detective, Dan Nubs. I reckon as he's ernuff ter tend to in one nite. It's your turn now, Danny! Up wi' yer han's!"

For reply the little detective did throw up his hands, but one of them held a revolver which exploded as it reached a level and down in his tracks fell the outlaw lieutenant. At the same instant the rattle of firearms came from the darkness behind the outlaws, and bullets began to fly thickly. In consternation the outlaws whirled to meet the foe in their rear. Then the Boy Rangers, regaining their weapons, hurled themselves on the Road Riders.

Out of the darkness came a hoarse voice, crying:

"Sic 'em, purp! Take 'em, Lion! Onto ther measly curs, ole dog!"

A muffled roar followed and a panther-like form shot through the air and alighted among the outlaws. Then a tall, brawny man sprung out of the gloom and leaped into the very midst of the dazed Night Riders. Right and left he swung his ponderous fists, disdaining to use other weapons. Back from his telling blows reeled his victims, some going down.

It was a hand-to-hand battle.

Suddenly the camp-fire was extinguished and the scene of strife was plunged into gloom.

Instantly realizing the folly of fighting in the darkness, where friends could not be distinguished from foes, Lucky Luke uttered a sharp signal and called off his men. In a few moments every sound of battle ceased.

Silence and darkness rested over the little valley.

CHAPTER V.

THE RIDERS' RAID.

THROUGH the darkness a man was walking slowly along the single street of White Hoss Camp. He proceeded cautiously and peered forward into the gloom as though searching for some one or something.

Suddenly a dark figure stepped out from around the corner of a building and confronted the lonely pedestrian, at the same time uttering a low word of warning.

"By ther freckled Sarah Jane!" exclaimed number one, who was the red-shirted fellow who called himself Tough Tom, the Terror from Tall Timber, "yer spoke jest in time, me lad. My narves air a leetle onstiddy ter-nite, an' I reckon I'd shute at ther drop o' er hat. I kem mighty nigh borin' yer antimony, any ole how," and he thrust a half-drawn revolver back into its holster.

Number two laughed guardedly.

"Ef ye'd salted Rough Dave ye'd 'a' been shootin' shiners out o' yer own pocket. I'm hyer ter putt ye onter a large snap," he said.

"Waal, yer sed as how ye wanted me ter meet yer hyer. I'm on han'; now, wot's ther go?"

"I've got a job spotted out an' I thort by ther cut o' your jib thet you war jist ther man ter take a han' in it."

"Wot kind o' er job?" asked Tough Tom, warily.

"One thet will pay powerful," Rough Dave declared. "Are you pio's?"

"Pio's!" snorted the Terror, in disgust. "Wot fer Heving's sake d'yer take me fer? Do I look like er saint?"

"Waal, hardly. I picked ye out on yer looks. You are erbout ther toughest specimen o' humanity thet hes struck White Hoss fer er month. But er feller often gits deceived wen he counts on looks. Ye'r sure ye don't belong ter ther church?"

Tough Tom stared at the interrogator as well as the darkness would allow. Then he slowly clinched his huge fists and growled savagely:

"Looker hyer, ef you want ter fight I'm jest yer hairpin. Ye hain't got ter make any more chin. Jist putt up yer jukes an' kem at me. Cy ther wall-eyed Sarah Jane! I'll polish ye off in style in jest erbout three seckints. Kem on! Walk up an' hook onter ther Terror frum Tall Timber. Whoop!"

And Tough Tom began prancing around Rough Dave, now and then shaking a fist under that individual's nose.

"Stop! Stop, you fool!" Dave cried, guardedly. "I don't want ter fight. Wot's tuer matter wi' yer—bin drinkin'?"

"Don't want ter fight, hey? Waal then, ye want ter take er reef on yer loose jaw. Ef ye give me enny more slack about belongin' ter ther church, hanged ef I don't pile inter ye, tooth an' nail. I kin stan' er common insult, but er kick like thet *does* rile me jest er bit. Wot is yer racket, anyhow?"

Dave glanced cautiously around. They were in a deserted portion of the street and shrouded from curious eyes by the darkness.

"D'yer know Bryton Gaines?" asked the rough, in a cautious tone.

"Reckon not," was the reply. "Who's him?"

"He's ther boss o' this camp. He ain't got no right to be, but he jest sets hisself up as chief, an' two-thirds o' the boys acknowledge his right. Nine-tenth o' ther other third dassen't dispute his claim. He's rich as mud an' owns ther howtel, though Billy Bunker runs ther shebang. He's ther small smooth-faced chap as wears dark clo'es and a b'iled shurt."

"Reckon I know ther galoot," said the red-shirted tough. "He slings on style ez though he owned ther camp."

"Waal, he's got er darter—er plum han'sum gal. But it's common talk thet ther ole man uses her wuss ez p'izen in sum respects. He dresses her hefty, but compels her ter sing in ther howtel skaloon. Everyboddy knows ez thet's er mighty tuff hole, an' ther gal hates like sin ter go there, but she's er mighty drawin' keerd an' calls in suckers ez w'u'dn't cum ef she didn't sing. Ther ole man knows thet an' so he keeps her at it."

"Waal, wot's thet got ter do wi' ther job?"

"You keep yer clo'es on an' lissen. You'll find out in time. I reckon if Bryton Gaines

sh'u'd lose his darter he'd lose er wallyble keerd; at ther same time, it w'u'd be er relief ter ther gal ter take her away frum him. Ketch?"

"No, blamed ef I do! Wot are ye drivin' at, any ole how?"

"W'y blame yer thick skull! Karn't ye see ther racket? Wots ter hinder us two coves frum skoopin' in ther gal an' kerryin' her orf inter ther hills?"

A broad grin overspread the Terror's face and he winked uselessly in the darkness.

"Ah, yes; I see. Plum' gone. Waal, wot yer givin' er feller ter help ye on wi' yer luv-makin'?"

Rough Dave uttered an impatient curse.

"Will ye never get anythin' thrue yer thick head?" he snarled. "I don't keer a continental 'bout ther gal. I'm after ther old cove's *cash*!"

For the first time Tough Tom began to see a ray of light.

"Ho! ho!" he muttered. "I twig yer game. Ye propose ter scoop ther gal an' hold her fur ransom."

"Thet's it, prezactly," Dave admitted. "I hev an idee as ther ole cuss will cum down in great style. Are you wi' me in this?"

"Waal, thet depends," replied the Terror, cautiously. "Wot's ther risk an' wot's ther in-doocements?"

"Ther in-doocements are jest hafe ther boodle. Ther risk is nothin' a tall. Every nite she leaves ther howtel by er back way. It w'u'd be ez easy ez fallin' orf er long ter wait out there fer her, an' when she kem erlong, throw er cloth over her head an' lug her."

"Whar sh'u'd we kerry her?"

"Never you worry 'bout thet. Jest leave it ter me. I know a fine place er hut among ther hills in er lonesome canyon where nobody w'd drap in on us. Are you in the game? Talk quick, fer we hain't got no time ter spar."

"Hyers my fin."

The two roughs shook hands in the darkness.

"Now ter bizness," said Rough Dave, sharply. "You make yer way round ter ther back o' ther howtel an' lay low, while I go fer ther hosses an' er blanket ter stifle ther gal's squalls. I'll be wi' yer in two shakes."

Then the plotters separated, and in a few moments the dark street was deserted.

Dayton Snare saw death lurking in the depths of Bryton Gaines's eyes as he uttered the ominous words with which the second chapter closes. He felt sure, now that his bitter foe had him at his mercy, no quarter would be shown. His face may have turned a shade whiter, but otherwise he showed no perceptible emotion. The revolver in his enemy's hand held him covered.

"You have the drop, Ralph Roberts," he admitted, "and can use the advantage as you choose. There is very little law in the average mining-camp, but I hardly imagine that a cold-blooded murder would be overlooked."

"You don't know my power in this camp," said the Westerner. "I actually have more power here than the average marshal does in his own burgh. I make the laws and all these rough fellows recognize my authority. Were I to shoot you dead where you sit, and swear that we were old foes who had sworn to shoot on sight, that would end it. I would see you decently planted, and to-morrow White Hoss would forget that such a person had ever entered its boundary."

Gaines spoke with an air which convinced his listener that he was telling the truth. Dayton Snare knew not what to say, so he uttered not a word.

At this moment the sharp tinkle of a bell sounded through the room, and from some hidden source a sudden flood of music burst forth. Gaines turned his eyes away from his foe for a moment, and in that brief instant he lost the drop.

A hand suddenly closed over the hammer of Gaines's revolver and a triumphant voice hissed across the table:

"My turn now, Ralph Roberts! Not a word or a cry! The first sound of alarm seals *your* doom!" and Snare held a revolver which threatened Bryton Gaines's life. There was a terrible gleam of triumph in the Easterner's eyes.

"Let go that gun!" the ex-cashier commanded. "Refuse at your peril!"

Only for an instant did Gaines hesitate, then he relaxed his hold, allowing himself to be disarmed.

"You are quite welcome to examine the weapon, Cyrus. It is a very fine one of the best make," was the undismayed response.

And now the curtain which concealed the little stage at the back of the room rolled up

and the music ceased. Then out upon the platform glided a vision of beauty—a young girl of perhaps eighteen or twenty appeared. She was dressed in white, and the garment fitted her perfect form so as to show its symmetrical beauty to advantage. There was no immodest exposure of limbs or person, and the sweet face of the fair creature bore the stamp of frankness and purity.

Every eye within the saloon was turned upon the stage, and in an instant every voice was hushed.

At the sight of the fair occupant of the stage, Snare uttered a sharp exclamation of astonishment and sunk back in his seat, his face colorless, and his whole frame shaking as though he had the ague. Fortunately his emotion was unnoticed, save in the immediate vicinity of where he was seated. In a moment the girl began to sing, and once more all eyes were centered upon her.

No, not all eyes. One pair, at least, were watching Snare with the steady glare of a panther which has sighted its prey. Bryton Gaines's orbs never wavered for an instant.

The girl began to sing, and such a flood of melody poured from her throat, that nearly every listener was held entranced. The rough gathering was breathless and spellbound for a time, and then, as the song became more and more pathetic, a suspicious moisture dimmed many an eye. Many a hardened wretch was thrilled to the very depths of his soul as the sweet singer in fancy led him back to his boyhood's home and his mother's knee.

The song ended and the singer vanished from the stage. A moment's silence was followed by a roar of applause which fairly shook the building.

In the midst of the excitement the muffled report of a revolver was heard. And then, as the cheers ceased, there was a sharp scuffle and a heavy fall, followed by a hoarse voice, crying:

"I've got 'im down! Hyer's one o' ther pesky road-agints—one o' Cap'n Cyclone's Riders!"

Instantly a rush was made toward the point from whence the cry came.

A sharp, shrieking whistle sounded through the room.

Through the open doors and windows sprung a dozen masked men, firing as they came. There was a crash of broken glass, and then darkness.

CHAPTER VI.

CARRIED INTO CAPTIVITY.

THE midday sun, hanging high in the heavens, permitted a limited amount of light to sift its way down through the gloom till it reached the bottom of a deep circular sink among the grand old hills. This sink was one of nature's freaks, and only at a few hours during the middle of the day was the daylight effectual in lighting the bottom of the sink. The pure sunshine never reached the bottom of this hole, which was sandy, and barren of verdure. From the rocks at one side, about four feet from the bottom of the sink, trickled a small stream of clear, cold water. This fell upon the sandy soil, and ran across the sink to the opposite wall, where it found its way into a little fissure among the rocks.

At one side was an opening about ten feet above the sandy bottom. A flight of rude stone steps, fashioned by the hand of man, led down into the hole. Another passage, nearly opposite, which debouched into the sink, led gradually away upward into an underground cavern.

Almost any day, at about the hour of noon, from two to a dozen rough-looking men could have been seen reclining on blankets spread upon the sand at the bottom of the sink. These fellows belonged to Captain Cyclone's Road Riders, and the sink was near the center of the outlaws' stronghold. The aperture from whence descended the stone steps led away to the outlaw chief's private apartment, where was stored the greater portion of the plunder obtained upon their unlawful raids. The other passage led to the main cavern or caverns, for there were many of them beneath the mountain, connected by numberless other passages.

It was but natural that near midday the outlaws should seek the open air, and as the sink was the only absolutely secluded spot in the immediate neighborhood of their den, thither they went.

Captain Cyclone himself, as he appeared while among his followers, was a most hideous-looking creature. His dark face was wrinkled and distorted and down across the left cheek from near the temple to the jaw-bone ran a ter-

rible blood-blue scar, which looked as though it might have been caused by the stroke of a knife. Upon his upper lip was a small, sharp-pointed, red mustache and a similar-appearing goatee was worn upon the chin. His long red hair was partially concealed by the hat which he invariably wore, the drooping brim of which shaded the expression of his eyes. To add to the outlaw chief's hideousness, there was an unsightly "hump" upon his back.

This horrible-appearing outlaw was not only a terror to his foes, but was feared by his followers as well. To all of them he was something of a mystery. At times he would be absent from the stronghold for two or three weeks in succession. Sometimes he would retire to his underground apartments with an injunction not to be disturbed on any pretext. When he did so, there was not one of his lawless band who dared disobey the order, no matter how important their excuse for so doing might be.

Many of the Road Riders' pilfering raids were led by the huge rough who was second in command. In his absence the chief trusted everything in Lieutenant Blizzard's hands, and to a certain extent the burly sub-officer showed himself well qualified for the position which he held. He was ingenious and crafty when not under the influence of liquor, and was bold and unprincipled at all times.

It was far past midnight on the night of the Riders' raid on the saloon in White Hoss when the outlaws reached their stronghold. Although he had not led the expedition, the road-agent chief was with them on their return.

Silently the dark Riders rode their horses into one of the secret passages which led downward into the underground retreat. Already had passed a sentinel, and as they entered the dark passage, they were met by a person who held several lighted torches which he passed up to them. Bearing these torches above their heads, they followed their silent chief down the passage. The rattle and clang of iron-shod hoofs alone broke the silence.

There was one among them, however, who knew not whence they were going. As well might he have been blind as far as the light of the torches was concerned, or dumb for all of the use he could make of his vocal organs. Blindfolded, gagged and bound upon the back of a horse, Dayton Snare was being carried a captive into the outlaws' stronghold!

When the lights went out during the outlaws' raid on the saloon in White Hoss, Dayton Snare had sprung to his feet and attempted to make an exit from the room. He had not taken half-a-dozen steps ere he received a crushing blow on the head which felled him senseless to the floor.

The next that he knew, he found himself bound upon a horse's back and being borne silently away through the darkness. His head pained him and his senses were still confused. For a time he could not remember what had happened. The pain in his head was so great that he did not try to think, but as he lay upon the moving horse's neck, he uttered an involuntary groan.

A hissing curse broke from lips near at hand, and a quickly muttered order was given. Then, almost before Snare could comprehend what was being done, deft hands had gagged and blindfolded him.

Then the night ride through the darkness continued.

When the captive had recovered sufficient strength to do so, he sat up in the saddle. He knew not whether he was being carried or in whose hands he was a prisoner. He made several ineffectual attempts to break the cords which bound him, but soon found this task impossible. The gag soon became uncomfortable, and finally it was almost unbearable, but try as he might, he could not force it from his jaws. Finally the agony caused by the gag became so great that the sufferer would have willingly surrendered all his earthly possessions to have had it removed.

But all unmindful of the suffering captive, the silent Riders pressed on. To Snare it seemed that they had been riding days and weeks when a sharp challenge brought them to an instant halt. A brief interchange of words unintelligible to the prisoner occurred, and then they moved forward once more. Dayton Snare knew well enough when they left the open air and entered an underground passage. The rocky walls confined and intensified the sound of the horses' iron-shod hoofs.

Down, down, into the bowels of the earth descended the silent riders. Finally they halted.

In low, hoarsely-muttered tones, the outlaw

chief spoke to his men; then flinging the bridle-rein of his horse to one who stood near he turned away.

Snare could not understand the outlaw's words. He realized that they were in a lighted chamber, for through the folds of the bandage which covered his eyes came a subdued red glow. He was soon given the privilege of viewing his surroundings, for deft hands stripped away the blinding cloth and quickly removed the torturous gag from his jaws. Then the cords which held him upon the horse were removed and he was dragged from the animal's back and stood upright upon the cavern floor.

As the first blinding glare of light filled his eyes, he was unable to see anything around him, but gradually he began to observe the dark figures of the outlaws, who were busily unsaddling the animals they had ridden.

During the brief space that he was allowed to glance around he was able to form no idea of the dimensions of the chambers. Neither could he tell from what source came the blinding glare of light which filled his eyes.

Heavy hands fell upon his shoulders, and with a burly guard on either side he was marched away along a narrow, winding passage. One of the guards bore a torch which illumined the way with a fitful flaring light.

Finally they paused before an iron door with a grating across the upper part. One of the guards produced a key and fitted it into the lock. The harsh, unpleasant sound of a rusty bolt moving reluctantly followed, then the ponderous door swung open.

As they thrust the prisoner through this doorway, one of the men cut the bonds which held Snare's hands. The heavy door swung to with a clang and the retreating footsteps of the two outlaws sounded along the passage, growing fainter and fainter and finally dying out in the distance.

CHAPTER VII.

THE KIDNAPPERS' VICTIM.

"MERCIFUL Heaven! Where am I?"

The words were uttered in a low, tremulous tone and unmistakably in the voice of a female.

A dim light burned within an old cabin situated in a lonely gulch, many miles from White Hoss. Upon a couch of boughs lay a beautiful young girl, the perfect contour of her face and figure being but dimly revealed by the flickering light. A rough, bewhiskered man was bending over the couch, while near at hand sat a red-shirted companion, grimly puffing away at a black pipe.

"She's cum to, pard," observed the fellow, near the couch of boughs.

"Knew she w'u'd," said the other, tersely.

The two men were Rough Dave and Tough Tom, the villainous plotters who had laid the scheme to abduct Vida Gaines, the beautiful daughter of Bryton Gaines, the magnate of White Hoss. That their plotting had been successful the presence of the beautiful victim testified.

The men had called the use of a powerful drug to their aid in stopping the girl's struggles and cries, and for a long time after they reached the deserted cabin she lay like one dead. At last Rough Dave, hardened wretch that he was, began to grow alarmed. Every effort to restore Vida to consciousness was a failure and it did seem as though she might actually be dead. But Tough Tom did not worry a bit.

"She'll cum roun' all rite, ole man," he averred. "Geelory ter Sary Jane! Don't you fret erbout thet feemale. You don't know nothin' 'bout wimmen, pard. They're the blindest contrary kritters as you ever did see. W'en ye want 'em ter do a thing they won't, an' w'en ye don't want 'em to they will. Ef ye'll let 'er alone, I bet a-hoss she'll cum round within hafe a nour."

The tough's words were true. Within twenty minutes the girl stirred and uttered a low moan. For ten or fifteen minutes she lay moaning and breathing faintly at first, but gradually stronger and stronger. Finally she opened her eyes to find the bearded, unpleasant face of Rough Dave hanging over her. A look of terror filled those blue orbs, and in a faint voice she gave utterance to the words recorded at the opening of this chapter.

"Ye'r all right, honey," assured Dave, after he had spoken to his companion. "Don't be skeered, little duck."

But far from soothing her fears, the hoarse voice of the rough alarmed the girl the more. With sudden, fitful strength she started up upon one elbow, glancing wildly around the room.

"Oh, where am I?" she cried. "What has happened? Who are you?"

Rough Dave attempted to laugh pleasantly.

"One at a time, Song Bird," said he, grinning. "How d'yer 'spect er feller ter answer all them things ter onc't? Ye'r wuss nor a Yankee fer axin' questions."

The girl shrunk from him in fear. He noticed the movement and a dark scowl overspread his features, making his look repellent indeed.

"W'ot ye skeered at?" he growled.

"Reckon she'd hav' blamed hard work ter name it," observed the Terror from Tall Timber, with a hoarse chuckle.

"You dry up!" snapped Rough Dave. "I don't want none o' yer slack."

"Now hole on," remonstrated Tough Tom. "Can't ye take a joke a tall, or is yer head so thick thet one can't crawl through? I hed ter stan' it w'en you fired away 'bout my b'longin' ter ther church."

"This hain't no time fer jokes," retorted Dave. "Keep yer loose jaw fer sum other 'casion. Ef ye git me riled jist now, I'll wipe yer karkiss all over this hyer rotten floor."

Tough Tom laid down his pipe and arose to his feet, at the same time spitting vigorously on his dirty hands.

"David," he said, slowly, "David, you hain't built arter ther right style ter wipe up any dirt ter speak ov with this hyer manly form o' mine. Ther fack is, David, I ken break yer dirty shape all up inter six-inch kindlin' in jest three-an'-one-hafe seckints by the chronometer. You hear me warble?"

Rough Dave was in an ugly mood just then, and he sprung toward his companion with a snarl which sounded like that of an infuriated animal. In an instant the two clinched in the middle of the room. Then began a fierce struggle for the mastery.

With dilated eyes, in the depths of which glowed a dreadful terror, the girl watched the terrible combat. Round and round, back and forth swayed the men, fast locked in each other's embrace. Their breath soon began to come in short gasps that told how fiercely they were wrestling.

"Yer got ter cum under, David," gasped Tough Tom, as he made extra exertions to win the victory. "Whoop'er up, Sary Jane! This hyer's business on ther roof. Down ye go, David."

"Not by a blamed sight," grunted Rough Dave, as he still succeeded in keeping his feet. "Cuss yer hide! I'll down ye, or break every bone in yer body."

Once the Terror succeeded in forcing Rough Dave to his knees, but a desperate effort brought that worthy again to his feet and the battle continued.

Suddenly there came a cry, followed by a heavy fall, and Tough Tom lay flat on his back, with the other sitting astride his body. A knife held in Dave's hand gleamed at the fallen man's throat.

"I'd er good min' ter cut a slit in yer woosel!" hissed the victor, his eyes gleaming evilly. "Thet w'u'd let out sum o' yer hanged fool blood."

"Better look out fer ther gal," gasped Tom, as soon as he could speak.

Dave uttered an oath and sprung up. One bound carried him to where Vida was vainly trying to unfasten the door. Inspired and strengthened by terror, the girl had made her way across the floor in a desperate attempt to escape, but the rusty iron hasp refused to move for her trembling fingers until a strong hand grasped her arm.

"Hole on! Not so fast, Song Bird!" cried her captor, roughly pulling her back. "This hyer cage hain't none too purty, but I don't reckon we'll let you fly frum it jest yet."

The girl uttered a shriek and turned on him with all the fury of a young tigress, striking and scratching the ruffian in the face. In vain he attempted to catch her hands. Blow after blow she rained upon his face, till he finally became exasperated. Uttering a brutal oath, he struck her a violent blow with his open hand and she fell senseless to the floor.

"Thar! I reckon thet'll stop yer clawin'. Ye'r wuss nor er she-cat," growled Rough Dave, as he glared down at the silent form at his feet.

"Thet wa' a purty stout clip ter strike er fee-male," observed Tough Tom from where he was once more seated, smoking as composedly as though nothing had happened.

"Hed ter do it," declared the big brute, as he picked up the senseless form and once more placed it on the couch of boughs. "She fit an' scratched like er cat. My hull face feels like it'd been skun."

The Terror laughed.

"It war as good's er cirkuss," he declared. "I thort one time she war goin' ter knock ye out fer sure. Hyer, ole man, turn er few draps o' this down her throat."

He passed a bottle of liquor to Rough Dave. The rough forced a few drops between Vida's lips and bathed her temples with it. A shiver ran over her frame, and then she lay still with closed eyes, breathing softly.

"She's all right," declared Rough Dave, as he proceeded to place the nozzle of the bottle to his own lips and invert the bottom toward the ceiling.

"Go light, pard," cautioned the Terror. "I feel ther want o' er leetle o' thet meself arter our tassil. You floored me, David, but ye did it foul. Yer can't never repeat thet leetle job any ole how."

"I kin do it four time; in five," asserted Rough Dave, as he passed back the half-emptied bottle. "Ef ye don't believe it come see me ag'en."

"Not this eve, some other eve," grinned Tom, as he accepted the bottle. "Hy'er's lookin' at ye with both eyes wide open tight."

And with this he proceeded to empty the bottle.

Shortly after one of the two roughs lay down on the floor to sleep, while the other kept guard. Thus, alternately taking turns at watching and sleeping, they passed the night.

The morning came clear and sunny, but the sunshine would not reach the bottom of Lone Gulch till the day was well advanced.

At an early hour the two kidnappers were astir. The girl lay upon the couch of boughs, still sleeping, exhausted nature thus asserting itself.

Making as little noise as possible, Tough Tom took up a rifle from where it stood in a corner, and started out to reconnoiter the gulch and shoot such game as he might be fortunate enough to see.

Rough Dave set about building a fire in the open fire-place. He soon succeeded in this, and within ten minutes a pot of coffee was boiling on the coals. The kidnappers had prepared themselves for several days' stay away from White Hoss, and soon Rough Dave had a portion of their supply of food spread upon a rickety old table. Then he went to the door and looked around for his companion. Tough Tom was not in sight.

The rough turned back into the cabin. "Wonder where ther durned fool's gone," he growled beneath his breath. "He mought 'a' known I'd hed breakfast within fifteen minutes. Let 'im go. I don't reckon I'll keep my stum-mic waiting long."

With this he sat down and began to eat. In a few minutes he had sated his hunger, and passing outside, once more looked anxiously around for his companion.

"Guess I'll take a look arter him," he observed, as he closed the cabin door and fastened it securely on the outside.

Then he turned and sauntered slowly down the gulch in Tough Tom's footsteps.

Thirty minutes later he came back alone. The cabin door was still fastened securely. He undid the fastenings and stepped into the cabin.

The next moment an imprecation broke from his lips.

The cabin was empty and the captive maiden gone!

CHAPTER VIII.

ESCAPE BAFLED.

VIDA GAINES was insured to hardships. Her whole life had been thickly checkered by trials. By nature she was timid and shrinking, but the life which she had led had taught her self-reliance.

Vida's earliest memory was of a sweet-faced but sad-appearing woman, whom she knew as "Mother." This memory seemed much like a dream. Indeed, it was so vague and indistinct that she could not sometimes force herself to believe that it was not a dream. The sad-faced woman had been very tender and loving toward little Vida, and even when her memory seemed most like a dream, it was the sweetest thing that the girl could recall in all her life.

Bryton Gaines was by nature harsh and tyrannical. As a child, Vida had feared rather than loved him, and her affection did not grow stronger as she became older. She knew not when the sweet-faced woman had passed out of her life, but Bryton Gaines once told her that she was dead.

Vida had been given a good education at an obscure Eastern school, and then her father had sent for her to join him in the West. Twice had

they moved since he came West, doing so once in a hasty, secret manner. Bryton Gaines was naturally a cool, calculating man, but Vida remembered that on the occasion of this hasty move he had appeared very much excited and alarmed.

Since their settlement in White Hoss Vida had been compelled by her unnatural guardian to perform a task decidedly repulsive to her sensitive nature. She was possessed of a rare sweet voice, and while at school had received painstaking instructions by a first-class tutor. Her father, who owned the White Hoss Hotel, at once perceived how Vida's vocal powers could be put to advantage in attracting a crowd to the hotel saloon and thus causing a flow of golden coin into his coffers.

At first Vida protested against the scheme. Her soul rebelled against appearing before the rough crowd which gathered in the drinking and gambling apartment of the White Hoss Hotel. Bryton Gaines was firm in his purpose. Entreaties, prayers or tears availed nothing, and the girl was finally compelled to consent to his demand.

Although she was badly frightened on her first appearance and only sung once, it proved a great hit for the sordid, money-loving Bryton Gaines. The crowd fairly went wild and when it was announced that she would sing again the following evening it cheered itself hoarse.

From that time, Vida sang nearly every night in the saloon, and never once by look, word or act did the motley audience offer insult to the fair songstress. Perhaps it was their fear of Bryton Gaines's wrath that restrained them; perhaps it was the spark of manhood that still smoldered in the breast of the most hardened wretch.

Vida soon gained an amount of self-reliance that most girls do not possess. This quality stood her in good stead on the morning after her abduction by the two kidnappers. While Rough Dave was eating his breakfast she awoke. The first object that her eyes fell upon was the big rough seated on a bench at the table, partaking of the rough food before him. She choked down the cry which sprung to her lips and lay perfectly quiet, watching the ruffian through her half-closed eyes. For a few moments her thoughts were vague and confused, but gradually she recalled the occurrences of the previous night. A shudder ran over her as she remembered the terrible struggle between the two kidnappers and her own frantic attempt to escape. She distinctly recalled the terrible shock of the brutal blow that had knocked her senseless. She wondered where the other of the two men was. Her own frantic efforts had prevented her from seeing the result of the terrible struggle between the two comrades in crime. Perhaps this fellow who was now eating at the table had murdered the other and she was here alone with the survivor, far from friends or aid. The thought made her very soul turn sick with horror.

His hunger sated, Dave arose and glanced around at the captive. She lay quite still with closed eyes, breathing regularly and quite heavily. Satisfied that she still slept, he passed out of the cabin and closed the door.

Vida was alone.

For several minutes she lay quite still, not daring to stir. She heard the man muttering outside, then his footsteps sounded fainter and fainter as he made his way down the gulch. When they had died out in the distance, Vida sprung to her feet with sudden energy. Hurrying to the door, she tried to open it, but found it fast. Then she quickly turned to the window. This she found quite too high for her to easily climb through.

"I must escape! I must escape!" her white, trembling lips kept murmuring.

With feverish haste, she dragged the old table across the floor and climbed upon it. She then found that she could crawl through the window, but that it would be a difficult task on account of the smallness of the aperture. One or two broken lights of glass remained barely held in by the rotten sash. With no trouble at all, she removed the sash and glass.

"I must escape! I must escape!" she still kept murmuring.

It seemed an impossible task to climb through the window, it was so high from the ground. But Vida was nerved by desperation and succeeded in accomplishing the difficult feat, lowering herself to the ground as safely as an acrobat could have done.

Then, when she became fully conscious that she was truly free, for the first time she lost her head and turning ran swiftly down the gulch directly in the footsteps of her captors.

Fortunately, however, she did not go far be-

fore she bethought herself that she had not paused to consider which way Rough Dave had gone. Instead of fleeing from him she might at that moment be rushing again into captivity. The very thought caused her to grow faint and sick with horror, and panting like a hunted animal, she sunk down beside a large boulder. The act was providential.

A moment later the form of a man appeared advancing up the gulch toward her. With renewed terror, Vida recognized him as one of her late captors. She would have sprung up and fled from him, but her trembling limbs refused to obey the command of her will.

As Rough Dave came toward her, Vida managed to crawl round behind the boulder, keeping it between herself and the man. Dave was walking with his head bowed and his eyes fixed on the ground.

Nearer and nearer he came, and with her heart beating as though it would break its frail wall, Vida crept slowly round the boulder. She felt almost certain that she should be discovered, but fortune smiled upon her and the rough passed without becoming aware of her presence.

For some time after Rough Dave passed Vida sat still, gradually regaining her strength and overcoming her terror. Finally she arose and hurried down the gulch as fast as she could.

The girl was still attired in the white dress that she wore upon her appearance on the stage at the saloon the night before. The garment was soiled and torn in many places. Her hair had escaped from the coil upon her head and now flowed loosely down her shoulders. There was no hat upon her head, and all together she was the picture of hunted and terrified innocence.

As long as her wavering feet would carry her she hurried on, but finally she was compelled to pause and rest. Every moment she expected to see Rough Dave returning in pursuit, but happily no such an unwelcome sight greeted her eyes.

When she had become thoroughly rested she arose and continued down the gulch. She did not travel so fast now for she wished to reserve her strength as long as possible. She was just congratulating herself on her escape when suddenly a dark form arose from behind a boulder and reached her side by a single spring. A rough hand seized her wrist, and an astonished yet triumphant voice cried:

"Geelory ter Sary Jane! Ef ther little dear ain't takin' a walk all by herself, my cognomen ain't Tough Tom, ther Terror."

Vida uttered a sharp shriek and sunk at his feet.

CHAPTER IX.

A CONSULTATION.

"SEND in Lieutenant Blizzard at once."

The Road Riders' chief gave this order without turning his head to glance at the man whom he had summoned to his presence.

"All right, sir!" was the prompt reply, and the outlaw's satellite disappeared from the cavern chamber.

Ten minutes later a heavy, unsteady step was heard advancing along the passage, then the heavy curtain which hung before the opening was swept aside, and the outlaw lieutenant advanced into the chamber.

"Ye sent fer me, boss," he said, as he made an awkward salute.

By the strong light which was diffused from a large glass globe suspended in the center of a small cavern chamber, Captain Cyclone saw that his subordinate wore a bandage which nearly covered his face. There were blood-stains on his clothes, and his whole appearance indicated that he had lately passed through some dangerous encounter.

For a moment the repulsive-appearing outlaw chief surveyed the man before him in grim silence. Captain Cyclone had been writing at a round table, near which he now sat. There was a chair near at hand, and toward this he motioned his subordinate. With a breath of relief, Lieutenant Blizzard sunk into the proffered seat.

"I am ready to listen to your report," remarked Captain Cyclone, grimly.

"I wish I war as reddy ter give it," the lieutenant acknowledged. "For ther fu'st time since I hev been your second, I hev failed to carry out your orders."

The hunchback's eyes flashed ominously.

"Why did you fail?" he demanded. "Surely you did not allow six boys to get away with ten good men?"

"Wal, not exactly, Cap. Them six boys were reinforced by two men whose fightin' abilities war ekil ter three good men each."

The lieutenant paused, but with a motion the outlaw chief signaled him to continue.

"Then, ter cap ther hull business," said Lieutenant Blizzard, "there war er big dorg as war flung right slap inter ther scrimmage. Thet war w'ot stampeded ther boys. They warn't lookin' fer anythin' o' thet kind."

"Give an account of the affair from the beginning!" commanded the chief.

With alacrity the lieutenant proceeded to do so. His version of the night's adventures in the camp of the Boy Rangers was not very clear, but the chief managed to grasp the main points.

"So Little Dan Nubs is on your trail again?" grimly uttered the chief. "He is worse than a sleuth-hound, but ten times worse than Dan Nubs is the man-hunter who is seeking my capture and the destruction of the Riders!"

"What!" cried Blizzard. "It can't be—"

"That Barret Dorne, the Border Detective, is in these parts—yes! That devil with the scent of a bloodhound has trailed me here. He was seen in Blue Nose not three days ago."

"Cap, Dan Nubs and Barret Dorne must die!"

"Right!" burst from the chief's lips, as he brought a clinched fist down upon the table with a thump that made things dance. "It is either their lives or ours!"

"It kem mighty near bein' mine," observed the lieutenant as he tenderly passed one hand over his bandaged head. "If ther bullet from ther leetle detective's gun had drapped a leetle lower I sh'ud 'a' bin in Kingdom Cum afore this. I don't want ter take my chances in ther same place ag'en."

"A miss is as good as a mile," quoth Captain Cyclone.

"Waal, as this warn't eggsactly er miss, we can't count it better nor hafe-er-mile," and the speaker made a lugubrious attempt to smile.

"This is no time for folly," growled the chief, sternly. "You know that twice already has the band been obliged to change its field of operations on account of too close attention on the part of Barret Dorne, the Border Detective. As for Little Dan Nubs, we know that he is like the immortal Phenix, which returns to life from its own ashes. It is going to take sharp work to down two such devils as these."

"It's their lives or our necks, boss," and the outlaw lieutenant tenderly caressed his throat and choked convulsively as though he already felt a touch of the rope which his many crimes had so thoroughly earned.

"You are right. From this time all our energies must be devoted to wiping out these two man-hunters. Their bones must bleach among these hills. Curse that devil, Dorne! He has already given more trouble than his life is worth. I would like the pleasure of choking the breath out of his body!"

The outlaw's fingers worked convulsively and his eyes burned with a deadly glow. His lips were drawn back from his yellow, snaggy teeth, and as he sat humped forward in his chair, he looked the very picture of a demon incarnate.

For some time the two sat plotting and conversing. The chief was crafty and bold, but he relied much upon his subordinate to carry out the schemes of his fertile brain. Carefully he laid out a course of action to be pursued in the case before them. Lieutenant Blizzard listened intently, seldom interrupting to ask a question, never to offer a suggestion.

Finally the lieutenant arose and left the chief's private chamber. Left alone, Captain Cyclone's self-possession vanished. He sprung to his feet and paced up and down the chamber like a caged beast. His hands, which were clasped beneath that unsightly hump upon his back, worked convulsively at times and now and then curses would burst from his lips. He seemed nearly overcome by anger and fear combined. Suddenly seizing a small dagger, he hurled it down upon the table with such terrific force that the point sunk deep into the the wood and the haft quivered for several seconds.

"I would give half I possess if that were planted in his heart this minute!" cried the passion-stricken outlaw. "Now that revenge is within my grasp, it exasperates me to have this devil once more cross my path."

For ten minutes he continued to pass up and down the cavern chamber; then he advanced to a small closet and throwing open the door, took therefrom a decanter of liquor. Seizing a glass, he hastily filled it to the brim. His hand

shook so that he spilled some of the liquid. Raising the glass, he dashed off the potion.

Then he made his way to a couch at one side of the chamber and flung himself upon it.

Hours later he was aroused by a messenger who placed a note in his hand. Hastily tearing open the note, he quickly devoured its contents, when he sprung to his feet.

"Order Lieutenant Blizzard to see that ten of the men are ready to ride with me at once," he cried. "Tell them to be prepared for hot work. Away!"

"When the messenger had disappeared the outlaw chief hurried to the same small closet from whence he had taken the liquor. This time it was food for which he searched. He found some and devoured it with haste. A drink of liquor followed, and pulling his hat well over his eyes, he hurried from the chamber.

CHAPTER X.

OLD BOMBSHELL AND DAN NUBS "STRIKE 'EM."

"GHOST o' the Pan Handle! W'ot er beauchif'ul leetle scrimmage! Reg'lar ragin' cirkis, hey ole purp? Reckon them galoots wi' mournin' clothes over their mugs thort er couple o' Lisbon yartbquakes hed bruck loose w'en ther Border Boomerang and his purp, Ole Lion, cum down on 'em. We jist scattered their antimonys all over this hyer part o' ther kentry. Reckon it seemed like a tornader 'd swept down outer them."

Thus muttering softly to his dog, Old Bombshell strode away through the darkness after the termination of the battle in the Boy Rangers' camp. "Ole Lion," his dog, followed close at his heels. The Border Boomerang was in high spirits, for if there was anything that he thoroughly enjoyed it was a "lively leetle scrimmage" like the one in which he had just taken a hand.

Upon the extinction of the fire, which had plunged the scene of battle in darkness, Old Bombshell had at once withdrawn from the struggle, at the same time calling off his dog. Believing that he could be of no further use in that vicinity, he hurried away toward where his horse was picketed, up the valley. He did not see a small dark form that came skulking along through the darkness, following in his tracks. Once or twice the dog paused and looked back with an angry growl.

"Cum erlong, ole purp," commanded Bombshell. "I know ye'd like ter go back an' hev it out wi' them fellers, but, business calls us away. Jist at present we are lookin' fer ther wolf-den o' Cap'n Cyclone. P'raps 'tw'u'd 'a' b'en ther best way ter kept an eye on them galoots wi' rags over their faces. Bet er hossgerin' er white-tailed wasp thet they'd led us to ole Cyclone's domicile. But we've lost our grip onto them fer ter-nite an' must look for other foxes ter foller. By ther Roman gods, ole dorg! we're er goin' ter make it warm fer these measley Road Riders. Cum erlong, Lion! Wo't in sin air ye growlin' at?"

The old man turned and glanced back into the darkness, but he saw nothing to warrant the dog's constant uneasiness. All around was dense darkness and silence.

Once more the Border Boomerang proceeded at a swinging easy lope. Although he had never been in the valley before that night, yet he did not hesitate about the course to pursue.

The stamping of a horse near at hand soon came to his ears, followed by a low whinny. The next moment he was by the animal's side patting its neck and caressing it as softly as a parent would his child. The intelligent animal placed its soft muzzle against its master's cheek in an affectionate manner.

"Ah-ha, Tornado!" muttered Old Bombshell. "You heerd ther ole man cumin', didn't ye? Been list'nin' ter ther sounds o' scrimmage, I'll bet a shillin'. Didn't worry 'bout ther ole man, did ye, hoss? I tell you, Lion an' I kin hold our own, so ye needn't worry 'bout us. Ghost o' ther Pan Handle, no!"

Old Bombshell pulled the picket-pin, and in a few moments was ready to depart. Springing upon the animal's back, the Border Boomerang was about ready to do so, when a cautious voice hailed near at hand:

"Hullo, stranger!"

Instantly a revolver leaped into Old Bombshell's hand, and the dog gave voice to a fierce growl and seemed about to plunge into the darkness. Peering keenly in the direction from whence came the hail, the Boomerang demanded:

"Who spoke?"

Instantly came the reply:

"Me, stranger—Little Dan Nubs, an' o'nery, dried-up specimen of ther human gender."

"Dan Nubs!" cried the big borderman. "Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! Cum forud, man, an' give me er chance ter squeeze yer han'. Dan Nubs! Waal, I swear!"

"Jest keep that there dawg o' yourn frum chawin' er piece out o' my system, an' I'm with ye. Ef thar's anythin' in this hull world as I don't like, it's er dawg."

Bombshell laughed, and with a few words succeeded in quieting Lion. Then, as the little detective advanced out of the darkness, the big man sprang down from his horse and stretched out a huge hand. In a moment the two crossed palms.

"This duz me proud!" declared Old Bombshell, as he put extra force into the grip which he gave the little man.

Dan Nubs did not wince; indeed, he returned the grip with a vengeance which told that muscles of steel lay within that small soft hand.

"Danny," said Old Bombshell, as he worked the little detective's arm as though it were a pump-handle. "This are a great occasion fer ther Border Boomerang an' his pards, Ole Lion an' Tornado. Lion is my dorg an' Tornado my hoss. I've heerd o' ye, Danny, an' often wanted ter grip yer fin. Yer cognomen is entwined with laurels o' glory an' wreaths o' fame. Ter putt it briefly, you hev got yer name up, an' this are a moment w'en Ole Bombshell's buzzum throbs wi' pride."

"Now ain't you spreadin' it on jest a trifle thick?" laughed Dan. "You make me blush all over my mug, an' ter blush at this time o' night with not even er star-beam ter reveal my maiden-like modesty, is folly indeed."

"Jest so," chuckled the Border Boomerang. "Ye sh'udn't be so sensitive 'bout sich leetle things. Now, fur instance, I'm sich er hardened ole wretch thet it w'd take er good strong spankin' with er shingle ter cause ther crimson ter suffuse my beauchiful phiz.—But ter drop this an' cum ter biz, w'ot brings Dan Nubs, ther detective, inter these parts?"

"Business, Bum'shell; business frum ther word go. I'm arter er chap as hails ter ther handle o' Ben Breeze. In these parts he is known as Lieutenant Blizzard—"

"O' Cap'n Cyclone's Road Riders."

"Jest so. Back thar jest afore ther scrimmage in which you and yer dawg so fortunately tuck a han', I had him at ther muzzil o' my revolver. He hed friends at han', an' called 'em up. Then he called on me ter throw up my han's. I did so, but sent er bullet along his skull at ther same time. I knew that ther chances were ag'in' me if I caved, an' so tuck desperate measures. Then follered ther fight. I lost my grip on Ben Breeze, but he'll carry er sore head fer a few days, I'm willin' ter swear."

"Waal, Danny, he slipped ye this time, but you must lay fer him ag'en. Ther Border Boomerang is noted as an outlaw extarminator an' he's reddy ter j'ine han's wi' ye in this racket. W'ot say, Little Dan?"

"That I shall be heartily glad of your assistance. If I saw a fair sample o' yer fightin' ability back there ter-nite, you must be a holy terror on trucks."

"Then hyer's my fin on it."

Once more the two strange men shook hands heartily, thus sealing the compact.

"Now," said Old Bombshell, "whar are we goin' ter bunk fer ther nite?"

"Not in this vicinity, Bumshell," objected the little detective. "Bill Breeze will be apt ter look fer me hyer ter-morrer an' cum with men enough ter wipe me out ef he finds me. We'd better hie ourselves to some other lokality."

"Prezactly; but, w'ot means o' locomotion hev ye, Danny?"

"A hoss, pard, a hoss. Dan Nubs ain't ridin' Shank's mare to any great extent nowadays. My animal is concealed up ther valley er piece. I picketed him thar and kem on afut. Thet blamed dorg o' yourn made considerable noise w'en I passed this spot. I war lookin' sharp fer snags an' lay low w'en you kem prancin' back this way ter see w'ot war ther matter. I didn't know ef ye war friend or foe, so I let ye pass an' then went on."

"Thet explains Ole Lion's warnin'. I didn't find anythin' out an' c'u'dn't think w'ot war ther matter wi' him."

Dan Nubs now hurried away to get his horse, and once more mounting his own animal, Old Bombshell rode leisurely up the valley. A few minutes later he was joined by the little detective, and side by side, they rode through the darkness, conversing in low tones.

At last they drew rein upon the brink of a

dark chasm, the depths of which they could not then fathom.

"This hyer bizness is gittin' er leetle skittish, Danny," observed the Border Boomerang. "Ef it warn't fur ther good hoss sense o' these animals, I reckon we'd be liable ter take er tumble as w'd shake us up er trifle. It's erbout time ter be thinkin' o'er a chance ter bunk."

"Guess ye'r right, Bumshell," admitted the little man. "We'd better p'int fer sum serclued nook an' spread our blankets beneath ther canopy o' heaven. We have—"

"Sh!"

The interruption came in a sharp, sibilant hiss as Old Bombshell's hand fell heavily upon the little detective's arm.

Both men listened intently.

From out of the darkness some distance away down the chasm came the unsteady rattling tramp of iron-shod hoofs passing over a rocky trail. Nearer and nearer came the sounds.

"Look out fer yer hoss," whispered Bombshell. "Don't let ther critter whicker!"

Then he slid from his own animal's back and crouched for an instant beside his dog. Lion had already become aware of the approach of some one in the defile below, and, with every muscle taut, was sniffing the air suspiciously.

"Steddy, ole dorg!" whispered Bombshell. "Keep yer chin music still now. Not a sound, ole purp!"

The dog seemed to understand, for he licked his master's hand and crouched silently in his tracks. Then Bombshell turned his attention to his horse.

"Stiddy, stiddy, Tornado!" he murmured, as he placed one hand over the animal's nostrils and patted its neck softly with the other.

Onward came the sounds until they were almost directly below. Both men listened eagerly and made out that a number of horsemen were passing in the defile. It was a critical moment, for had one of the horses or the dog on the bank above made a noise the riders below would have become aware of the near proximity of others than themselves. But no alarm was given, and the night riders passed on.

"Danny," whispered Bombshell, excitedly, "we must get down thar to onc't. I'll bet a hoss thet is some o' Ole Cyclone's gang. We've got ter leave these hosses. Ole Lion will guard 'em. Lively, Danny, lively!"

The two men made quick work. Within a few seconds the horses were picketed in a safe place, and after telling the dog to remain there and guard them, Old Bombshell led the way swiftly along the brink of the defile, closely watching for a place to descend. At the risk of broken bones, they made their way downward through the darkness, descending the almost perpendicular face of a rocky wall. They reached the bottom in safety and hurried on after the night riders.

For somewhat more than a mile Bombshell and Little Dan followed the horsemen, who were, in fact, Captain Cyclone himself and a part of his followers returning from their raid on the saloon in White Hoss, carrying with them Dayton Snare, a prisoner. Finally the outlaws turned into a narrow cut the nearly perpendicular walls of which were oppressively close together. For some distance they proceeded along this cut in silence. Finally they were brought to a halt by a sharp challenge. There was a moment's interchange of words, then the Riders passed on, but Old Bombshell and Little Dan Nubs remained crouching in their tracks several rods down the cut.

"Thar's er sentinel thar," whispered Bombshell. "We can't go further now, but it'd be safe ter gamble thet we are cluss onto one o' ther entrances to Cyclone's wolf-den. Danny, you undersized little runt, we've struck 'ile, by ther Roman gods! an' don't ye fergit it!"

CHAPTER XI.

FROM THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE.

UTTERING that one sharp shriek of despair, Vida sunk at Tough Tom's feet in utter abandonment of hope. She had so nearly succeeded in escaping that the sight of this fellow, one of her former captors, fell like a cruel blow upon her eyes.

As for the Terror, he was surprised at the sight of the girl whom he had supposed still in the lone cabin, safely guarded by his comrade in crime. How she had succeeded in escaping from Rough Dave was a mystery which he did not puzzle his brains over a great deal. It was evident that she had escaped, but as fortune directed, she had fled straight into his detaining grasp.

"Geelong ter Sary Jane!" repeated the villain, with a horribe chuckle. "Ther leetle bird

got tired o' her cage an' flew away frum et, did she? But she came straight to her protector's arms. It w'dn't do fer ther leetle deer ter be loose in these hills. Hawks are thick an' seek sich tender morsils fer prey. You will be much safer in yer guiltless cage, leetle Song Bird."

Vida did not reply, but burying her face upon her arms, she broke into sobs of bitter despair.

"Cum, cum, leetle gal," said the Terror, attempting to be cheerful. "Don't take on in thet way. You sha'n't be hurt. We are only keepin' ye till yer rich ole dad passes over sum o' his ill-got boodle. He's got ter cum down in great style an' he kin afford to. I reckon he's got haydoogins o' skids."

"Cum, cum, leetle one, brace up an' it'll cum out right in ther wash. Ef ye are skeered o' Rough Dave, I'll stan' atween ye an' him. I didn't go into this hyer business ter knock down wimmin ther way he did las' nite, an' though I'm er mighty tuff cuss, I'm not low down ernuff ter injure an innercent feemale gal."

"Then that saves your bacon!"

The words fell like an unexpected thunderbolt upon the ears of the tough. He wheeled like a flash and found himself covered by a rifle held in the hands of a beardless young man, who was seated upon a large stone twenty paces away.

"Up with your hands!" commanded the young man. "No funny business! Up with them lively, and be careful that they are empty if you do not want to taste lead!"

Mechanically the tough obeyed. He did not dare to refuse, for he saw a deadly light gleaming in the speaker's eyes.

"Good enough," came curtly from those beardless lips. "There is evidently no fog on your brain. Now you will please turn your back to your humble servant, taking care not to lower your hands. Now, round you go! That's right; steady so! Now, partner, don't for your life turn your head, for it will be your death warrant to try it. Remember I am keeping you covered all the time."

The young fellow lay down his rifle, but drew a cocked revolver at the same time. Then he sprang up and swiftly advanced to where the Terror from Tall Timber was standing. Tough Tom felt the muzzle of a revolver pressed against the base of his skull and at the same time a deft hand removed the weapons from his belt and flung them away.

The kidnapper could not repress a growl of anger.

"Ye never'd got ther dead drop onto me ef I hadn't let go my rifle ter ketch this gal," he declared. "Dod blame ther luck! Who be ye, anyway?"

"Lucky Luke, at your service," laughed the captain of the Boy Rangers, for the young man who had so fortunately come to Vida's rescue was in truth Captain Luke.

"Now, my unfortunate friend, you will please lie down on your face. That's business; down with you. No fooling!"

Uttering fierce curses, the ruffian slowly obeyed this command. Captain Luke forced him to lie at full length upon his face and cross his wrists behind his back. Then swiftly and deftly the Boy Ranger bound the tough's hands with some cords which he drew from his pockets. Then he turned his attention to Tough Tom's feet. In a few seconds' time he had the kidnapper "trussed up in style."

"There you are, my dandy," cried Luke, as he viewed his work with an admiring eye. "I think those strings will keep you quiet for a while. I presume you have friends near who will find and release you by and by, have you not?"

But a string of oaths was the only reply which the unfortunate tough would utter.

Vida, who had recovered her composure since the unexpected appearance of this unknown friend, and was now standing near, ventured to answer Luke's question.

"There is another of them, sir. They kidnapped me from my home in White Hoss last night and brought me to this dreadful canyon, and I was held a prisoner in a cabin, from which I escaped this morning. I would rather die than go back there with those terrible men."

There were still tears in Vida's eyes, and as she stood before him with clasped and trembling hands, Luke was ready to swear that never before had he seen so beautiful a maiden. There was a glow of admiration in his eyes, and an earnest ring to his voice, as he replied:

"Never fear; I assure you, miss, they shall not take you back there if I am able to prevent it. I am ready to protect you with my life, if necessity should arise!"

"Oh, thank you, sir! You are kind, indeed," murmured Vida, her eyes falling before Luke's ardent gaze and a faint flush giving her cheeks a touch of pink. "How can I ever repay you, Mr.—"

"Call me Luke. Some make it Lucky Luke, some Captain Luke. As for pay, we will speak of that at some other time—perhaps. Then you think this fellow's companion will find him if we leave him here?"

"Yes, he will probably come back this way when he finds that I have not gone up the canyon."

"Good enough. That will save me the trouble of looking him up to see that he does not starve. And now, if you are ready, we will go away from here. I have some companions who are camped several miles from this spot, and with them to aid in protecting you, it will be an easy task to return you safely to your home in White Hoss."

When they were ready to depart Luke gallantly offered Vida his arm, which the girl gladly accepted, as she was quite weak from the effect of the great excitement through which she had just passed. Thus, arm in arm, they proceeded down the gulch, followed by a string of curses from the lips of the discomfited kidnapper.

As they walked along Vida told Luke the whole story of her recent adventures with Rough Dave and his accomplice. Luke listened with interest, and when the girl told of that brutal blow which had stricken her senseless, he could not repress an outburst of anger.

"The scoundrell the brute!" he cried. "To strike a helpless girl whom he had in his power! lynching is too good for such a wretch. He'll receive no mercy at my hands if I ever get the drop on him!"

Vida became more and more confiding, and piece by piece she told him the story of her entire life. For some reason Luke did not seem like a stranger to her; he seemed more like a dear friend to whom she could unbosom her secrets.

And Luke? He listened, enchanted by the sound of her sweet voice and the sight of her beautiful face so near to hers. Each moment he became more and more interested in his protegee.

Finally Vida turned to him with:

"Now tell me something of yourself, Mr. Luke."

Her frank, direct manner was in no way suggestive of boldness, but rather of unsophisticated innocence.

For a moment Luke was embarrassed, but he answered:

"I know you will pardon me, Miss Gaines, if I tell you plainly that I cannot be as frank with you as you have been with me. There are parts of my life which are sealed and of which I shall never speak till the time of judgment and retribution comes for one who perpetrated a terrible crime years ago. Let it suffice to say that I was deserted by my father at an early age and have led a wandering life since I became able to do so."

Onward went the young couple, deeply engrossed with each other and quite unmindful of their surroundings. Each moment Luke became more and more enamored with the fair girl by his side. Vida was sure that never before had she met such a gallant and entertaining young man. Already were they being inspired in the meshes of love's delightful net.

Not a warning of danger fell upon their ears till half-a-score of masked men arose, seemingly out of the ground, all around them. Directly in their path stood the bump-backed, repulsive chief of the Road Riders, and it took but a glance to tell that the masked men were his followers.

Vida had been rescued from the hands of Tough Tom only to fall with her rescuer into the clutches of that terrible outlaw, Captain Cyclone! Verily this was getting "out of the frying-pan into the fire."

CHAPTER XII.

THE MYSTERIOUS VAILED WOMAN.

NIGHT had once more spread its mantle over hill and vale. The camp-fire of the Boy Rangers burned brightly within the depths of a well-sheltered gully. Around the fire were gathered all of the Rangers except Captain Luke. He was absent. A look of gloom brooded on the boys' faces.

"It is strange why Luke has not returned," observed Tom Dole, as he stared steadily into the fire. "Something must have happened to him."

"No business ter go chasin' arter Ole Bumble-

bee an' dat big dog," asserted Firetop, with a solemn shake of his red head. "By golly! I bet dat dog jess lief bite as breaf."

"Yaas, he looked like he was particularly fond of red headed niggers," remarked Bob Swett, a faint smile resting on his fat face for an instant.

"Git out, dar! Go 'way, now!" cried the darky, promptly. "Dat dog ain't no fool. Ye don' kotch him eatin' nigger, w'en he kin git good steak offen er fat chile like you is."

"We don't keer anythin' 'bout ther ole man or his dawg till we know w'ot's becum of Luke," said Ned Pepper, anxiously. "He started out ter see if he could find traces of Ole Bum'shell, an' he ain't cum back yit. Didn't he tell you he'd return by noon, Tom?"

"Yes, he said he surely would be here by hash time. He said that he was not going far and might be back within an hour."

"That was early this morning," broke in Bob Swett. "Joe and I have tramped over near twenty miles of territory since dinner, searching for him, but not a trace have we found. Where can he have disappeared to?"

"You tell," snapped Happy Joe. "'Twixt racin' arter him an' tryin' ter make this blamed ole pipe go, I'm pritty nigh used up."

"It's too bad about you," uttered Tom Dole, with mock sympathy. "I'm really afraid you'll die sometime for want of breath."

"Reckon thet'll be ther trubble if anythin' is," Joe admitted. "I don't count on livin' er great while arter I stop breathin'."

"Which shows that you are a great deal more sagacious than one would imagine by your external aspect," observed Bob Swett, sarcastically.

"Well, I swan!" gasped Happy Joe. "Did you fellers ketch onto them big words? Reckon Bob's been studdyin' er dictionary lately."

"This isn't settlin' what has become of Captain Luke," put in Tom Dole, impatiently.

"No, dis ain't nuffin' but chin, chin, chin!" cried Firetop. "Yo' fellers am all talky-talk."

"I don't see how we are goin' ter settle that question, anyhow," added Ned Pepper. "There hain't no way o' findin' out w'at becum o' him ter night."

"Not unless some good fairy turns up to give us the desired information," uttered Bob Swett, with a dejected air. "If I were a magician, I might conjure up a fairy or a witch, it would make little difference which, so long as she brought news of Captain Luke."

"Suppose you try yer luck," suggested Ned. "W'ot er joke it'd be ter rip up er ginnywine ole female witch."

"Hole on dere!" cried Firetop, in some alarm. Don' ye go ter cuttin' up any monkey shines, chillun'. My ole gran'marm used to allers be callin' up de witches an' sich boogerish fings. She's skeered dis nig out ob fo' mon'fs groaf hundred ob times."

"That explains w'y ye'r red-headed," chuckled Ned. "A white man's hair turns white w'en he's powerful skeered—a nigger's turns red. Ha! ha!"

"He! he!" mocked the darky. "Laff erway ef ye wants to. I don' keer."

The boys could not repress their merriment, despite the fact that they were sorely troubled by their leader's absence. When they had ceased to laugh, Ned arose, and, with a view of having more sport at Firetop's expense, said slowly:

"Fairies or witches, wherever ye be, Come quickly and bring a message to me!"

Scarcely had he ceased speaking when a woman's voice came from out of the darkness near at hand:

"Whether I am fairy or witch, I bring you tidings of your absent friend."

With amazement written on their countenances, the boys whirled quickly in the direction from whence came the voice. Out of the shadows advanced a woman, leading a horse. She paused a few paces away, in the full glow of the firelight, where the boys were able to obtain a good view of her.

They saw before them a medium-sized woman, who was dressed in a dark suit, and wore a veil over her face. The horse behind her was a coal-black animal, and upon its back were lashed some trappings, apparently a light camping outfit.

At the sight of the woman the darky uttered a yell, and, doubling up like a jack-knife, rolled over several times, but finally lay still, glaring at the apparition, with his teeth chattering vigorously.

The other boys, each and every one, placed a

hand upon a convenient weapon, but a motion of the woman's gloved hand caused them to relax their grasp.

"I come here as a friend," said she, quietly. "While you were talking I approached near enough to hear what you were saying. From your words, I am led to believe that you have lost your leader."

"Which is true, madam," admitted Tom Dole. "Our captain, Lucky Luke, went away at sunrise this morning, and has not yet returned. We fear that he is in trouble."

"Is your captain a tall, beardless youth, dressed in a half-buckskin costume?"

"He is! You have seen him?" eagerly cried Tom.

"I think so. Together with a beautiful girl, he has fallen into the hands of the band of outlaws who infest these hills."

"How do you know this?" demanded Tom, a look of consternation and alarm appearing upon his face. "There was no girl with him when he left us."

"The outlaws passed within a rod of where I lay concealed. In their midst was this young man, bound upon a horse's back, and by his side rode the fair girl. She was weeping, and as they passed I heard him tell her to cheer up. He said that friends of his would soon come to their rescue."

This announcement produced great consternation among the boys. They gathered around the strange woman, demanding that she guide them at once to the spot where she had seen their captain a captive in the midst of the outlaws.

"Wait," she said calmly. "I cannot guide you there now, and if I could, it would do no good, for you could not follow their trail in the darkness. I followed the outlaws as far as the nature of the country would allow without exposure. Then I gave it up. In the morning, I will put you on their trail and you can then run them to their hole."

The boys soon became convinced that this was the only method to pursue, although they reluctantly gave up the idea of making some move toward their leader's rescue at once.

After picketing the horse near by, the woman removed the trappings from its back, and, with the aid of the boys, soon had a small canvas tent pitched near the fire. Not for an instant during the time did she remove the veil from her face. From a pair of holes cut in the upper part of the gauzy mask shone two eyes, which Tom Dole afterward declared gleamed in the firelight like twin stars.

As soon as the tent was pitched, the woman entered and retired for the night.

The boys sat around the fire, conversing in low tones for some time. Finally, after deciding upon taking turns at guarding the camp, they ceased talking and soon four of them were sleeping soundly, while the fifth kept watch and ward over the camp.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

WHEN the heavy cell door had closed, Dayton Suare stood still in the darkness listening to the retreating footsteps of the two outlaws. It was several moments before he could realize the full horror of his position.

"My God!" he groaned, as he wrung his hands in anguish. "What a horrible fate! Something seems to tell me that my deadly foe, Ralph Roberts, has triumphed over me and that I am now at his mercy. If so, I need not expect any leniency at his hands. He will take my life with as little compunction as he would feel in destroying an animal."

For several moments he stood alone in the black darkness with his hands clasped and his head bowed upon his breast. His spirit seemed utterly crushed. Finally a hard, mirthless laugh broke from his lips.

"This is the working of Providence!" he cried, wildly. "This is my punishment! God in Heaven! Have I not been punished enough already? My whole life has been one of bitter remorse. That one thoughtless act sent her who was dearer than my own life to her doom! To-day I would willingly die if I could recall that first bitter word. But the past cannot be recalled."

His lips and tongue were dry and stiff. His head swam and all around him in the gloom danced myriad points of light, which assumed fantastic forms but never remained motionless for a second. He seemed to feel rather than see hundreds of grinning, hideous faces peering at him on every hand. A terrible choking sensation seized him, and he gasped for breath.

"I shall go mad!" he gasped, hoarsely. "I must have a light!"

Hastily he felt through his pockets, and to his intense delight, discovered some matches of which his captors had not deprived him. With trembling fingers he proceeded to strike one of them on his clothes. The brimstone ignited, burned blue in the darkness for an instant and then the match blazed steadily.

By the light of the burning match he saw that he was in a bare, cell-like chamber, about twenty feet square. There was no furniture of any kind within the chamber, not even a chair or a cot bed. It was a terribly desolate place.

The prisoner held the match until the flame burned his fingers; then with feverish haste, he proceeded to light another, and he once more scrutinized the cell. A cry of delight burst from his lips as he espied a half-burned candle resting upon a rocky shelf-like nook at one side of the chamber.

Another match was brought into use, and with considerable trouble, he succeeded in lighting the candle. A sigh of relief escaped his lips when he had done so.

"Now," he said, as he took the candle in his hand, "I will examine this hole thoroughly and try to discover if there is no way of escape. If I have to stay here when this candle is burned out I shall go mad. I cannot conceive of punishment more terrible than to place a person in such a place as this without a light."

He at once began to examine the walls. Picking up a small round stone, he passed around the cell rapping sharply on the stone walls and listening intently to the sound. If he had based any hopes on a possible escape through the walls, he was doomed to disappointment for everywhere they gave back the same dead, hard sound. Here and there a few pebbles and small stones came rattling down.

"They are all solid," he muttered, with sinking heart. "It is no use to try them. I am doomed!"

But he did not give up all hope although he knew that the chances were a hundred to one against escape. Candle in hand, he approached the cell door. Holding up the light he peered through the grating out into the narrow passage. Only the bare rocky walls met his gaze.

He drew back with a despairing groan. In sudden desperation, he hurled himself with all his strength against the heavy door. To his amazement the door swung slowly open!

For a moment Snare believed himself a victim of a hallucination. That the cell door had indeed swung outward before that desperate push he could scarcely believe. He passed one hand across his eyes, as though to brush away the delusive vision, and leaned against the cell wall in very faintness of heart, fearing that it would prove a vision indeed.

A cry of joy burst from his lips when he discovered that the door was indeed open. With trembling limbs he hastened to leave the cell.

"Great God, I thank thee!" he murmured. "Any fate is preferable to remaining here."

To Dayton Snare it seemed that the hand of Providence had been instrumental in his release from the cell. In truth, the cell door had not been locked. When the guards had thrust the prisoner into the cell, one of them had turned the key carelessly in the lock. The rusty bolt had moved part way, but had not entered the socket. As the lock was rusty and unused, the guard did not suspect the true cause of the difficulty he experienced in removing the key.

As fast as his legs would carry him, Dayton Snare hastened away along the winding passage. He knew not whither he was going and little cared so long as he got away from that dreadful cell.

For a time he rushed along in this manner, blind and unreasoning. Finally his better judgment overcame his fears, and he proceeded more cautiously, holding the candle aloft and peering anxiously forward into the darkness.

"I must be careful," he muttered. "I may run directly into the midst of the outlaws, and once more be taken prisoner."

Occasionally he would pass openings of other passages, which led away into the bowels of the earth, he knew not how far. Several times he paused, undecided about turning off into one of these passages. Finally he entered a small, round chamber, from which led half a dozen passages in as many different directions. Here he halted, undecided which one to follow.

"I will trust to Providence," he murmured, and choosing one of the passages at random, continued to press forward.

The passage was narrow and crooked, and the many twists and turns soon served to thoroughly confuse him. Finally he found the way blocked by an abrupt wall. Then he turned back and entered another passage. From this he soon turned into one which appeared larger and more inviting. But this finally ended.

Then he resolved to return to the round chamber and take some other passage. But it was easier to resolve to do such a thing than it was to do it. He tried passage after passage, each moment growing more alarmed and confused. Finally a terrible truth forced itself upon his benumbed sense of reasoning.

He was lost!

Now, indeed, his position was terrifying. Lost underground! He might wander through those deserted passages for hours, ay, for days, till he became exhausted by hunger, and meet no living being. Then, when he became so weak that he could go no further, he must lie down and perish miserably there in the horrible darkness.

His position as a prisoner in the bare cell had been terrible, but it now seemed to him that his present position was ten times worse. In very agony of soul he shrieked aloud.

The sound seemed terribly intensified and condensed as it went echoing away down the winding passage. He listened, almost terror-stricken by the unnatural sound of his own voice.

Hark! Did his ears deceive him, or was that an answering cry that he heard? He tried to hush the throbbing of his heart as he strained his ears to listen.

He was not deceived. Faintly to his ears came the sound of a human voice in the distance. Crouching in his tracks, he listened to hear the cry repeated several times.

Then, for a moment, all the old wild fear of discovery and recapture fell upon him. He came near turning and flying away along the passage, anywhere to get out of the sound of that voice. Caution and reason prevailed, however, and he advanced slowly along the passage, listening intently for any alarming sound.

As he advanced the sound of those cries became more and more distinct. He soon made out that it was a woman's voice. A woman! Perhaps she was in distress. All the chivalry in Dayton Snare's nature became aroused at the thought, and he hastened swiftly forward.

The cries which came to his ears were meaningless. He could distinguish no words, and once he almost halted as a wild, maniacal laugh came echoing along the passage.

"There is a human being there," he muttered, "and I am going to see it before I turn back."

He soon came to an iron door set within the face of a solid wall. Across the upper part was a grating and from beyond the door still came the cries which had lured him there.

He held up his light and peered through the grating. A cell similar to the one from which he had escaped met his gaze, and in the center stood a wild-appearing woman, whose clothes hung about her in shreds and whose long hair flowed down over her shoulders. Her eyes were ablaze with an insane glare.

As Dayton Snare pressed his face against the grating, she started back, throwing up both hands and crying:

"It is he! Cyrus! Cyrus!"

"God in Heaven!" shrieked Dayton Snare. "It is Vivian, my wife!"

And he fell senseless to the ground.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FEARFUL ALTERNATIVE.

AT about the hour of noon on the day that Lucky Luke and Vida Gaines fell into the hands of Captain Cyclone and his lawless followers, half-a-dozen outlaws might have been seen stretched out upon the sand at the bottom of the sink which marked the center of their underground stronghold, engaged in smoking, chewing tobacco, playing cards and telling stories.

Already were Luke and Vida captives within the cavern, the former having been confined in a dark dungeon-like cell, similar to that from which Dayton Snare had escaped. Luke, however, was given a light and he found within his cell a small cot bed and a chair.

Vida was treated more kindly. True, she was confined beneath lock and key, but the chamber in which she was placed was a Paradise compared with some of the others. The light from a large glass chandelier, suspended in the center of the chamber, showed her a very comfortable and almost luxuriously furnished apartment. Soft gray curtains concealed the rocky walls and a handsome carpet covered the floor.

Upon a small table in the center of the room lay several books and one or two magazines. There were several upholstered chairs in the room, a handsome sofa and other things which might have been found in any well-furnished apartment.

Vida was greatly surprised by her surroundings, but her surprise did not prevent her throwing herself upon the sofa and weeping bitterly.

At noon a man unlocked the cell, or chamber, door and brought in a tray on which were some dishes of dainty and tempting food. Leaving the tray and its burden, the man retired, locked the door and passed on.

Thirty minutes later he entered the sink where the outlaws were telling stories and playing cards. His face looked white and scared, and he made a covert signal to one of the outlaws. Then he turned and re-entered the passage and the fellow to whom he had signaled followed him a few moments later.

In the darkness they came together, and the one who had made the signal said:

"Bob."

"Waal, Joe?"

"We're in fer it."

"Wot d'yer mean?"

"Ther pris'ner thet we chucked inter Number Four las' night hes escaped."

The one addressed as Bob seized his companion fiercely by the arm.

"Ye'r lyin', pard!" he gasped.

"I jest wish I waz," was the dogged reply; "but it's true as Gospel. 'He got ther door open sumhow an' w'en I went ter kerry 'im his hash jest now I found 'im gone.'"

"Yer hain't mentioned this ter nobody?"

"Nary mention."

"We must get out o' hyer to onc't. If ther chief finds this out while he kin putt his han's onto us our lives wun't be w'uth er hoot."

"Right you are, pard. Let's git instanter."

And with as little delay as possible, the two outlaws hastened to get beyond reach of the vengeance of their terrible chief.

On the way out of the cave they passed a person who was bearing a light, and whom, with some fear, they recognized as Lieutenant Blizard. The lieutenant cast a suspicious look at the two men, but uttered not a word as he passed on. He still wore the bloody bandages around his head and over one eye, and these cloths, together with his black beard, effectually concealed his features; but from beneath the lopping brim of the hat still peered a piercing eye.

Straight on into the main chamber of the cavern he strode, and then without paying the least heed to several outlaws who were present, turned into a wide passage and was soon standing before the cell in which Lucky Luke was confined.

Taking a key from his pocket, the man unlocked the cell door and entered. Luke, who had been lying on the rough cot bed, started up and faced the intruder.

"Hullo! hullo!" growled the fellow with the bandage around his head. "Bin takin' it easy, hev ye? Waal, I don' know as I kin blame ye, much. Yer might ez well take it easy while ye kin. Ther chief will hev ye in hot water soon ernuff."

"What is to be done with me, anyway?" demanded Luke. "Why was I brought here?"

"Easier asked than answered, young feller. I don't reckon ez how many o' his men are in ther habit o' inquirin' inter ther cap'n's bisness. It w'u'dn't be healthy."

"Well, at least you can tell me what they have done with the young lady who was captured with me."

"I can't even do that. 'Cause why? 'Cause I don' know."

"I believe you lie," remarked Luke, calmly.

The big fellow laughed.

"You've got gall ter tell me so," he said.

"You are unarmed and alone, a prisoner; I am armed and have more than a dozen men to back me, yet you dare tell me I lie. I'd er good mine ter blow ther hull ruff o' yer cabeza off!"

Apparently seized by a sudden fit of rage at the thought of the youth's audacity the speaker whipped out a revolver and quickly leveled it at Luke's head.

The captain of the Boy Rangers laughed in his face.

"Don't make a fool of yourself," came calmly from Luke's lips. "You don't dare to shoot, and I know it. Captain Cyclone's vengeance would fall heavily upon your head if you should slay one of his prisoners without permit to do so."

The man lowered his revolver.

"Guess ye'r right," he admitted. "It's no use ter try to scare you in thet way. You ought to

hey been named Plucky Luke instead o' Lucky Luke."

"It required but little pluck to face you when I knew you did not mean shoot."

"Well, it took some coolness, young man," said the fellow, speaking grammatically, much to Luke's surprise. "I admire your nerve, and am quite sure that I can make use of you in the emergency that is pretty sure to come. Instead of being a foe to you, I am a friend, and in due time I will assist you to escape from this underground den."

Captain Luke was amazed. He stared at the speaker incredulously for a moment, and then demanded:

"Who in Satan's name are you?"

"I am Lieutenant Blizzard, an outlaw—apparently. When the time comes for me to reveal my true identity, you shall know who I really am. I would release you from this cell at once, but some of the outlaws might happen along this way and find that you were gone. That would ruin my plans. For a time you must remain under lock and key, but at the proper moment you shall be released. Until then, keep up your spirits."

The man arose to go, and Luke sprung up, crying eagerly:

"You say you are my friend. If you speak the truth, you are also a friend to the young lady who was taken prisoner with me. I beg you to see that no harm comes to her. Her position must be terrible, indeed, a captive in this wretched place."

"I promise you faithfully that if I can prevent by interposing my own life between the young lady of whom you speak and harm, I will willingly do so," said the strange outlaw, soberly. "Here is my hand on it."

If Captain Cyclone had peered into that cell a moment later he would have witnessed an astonishing sight—apparently his trusted lieutenant warmly shaking the hand of Lucky Luke, his prisoner.

While this scene was transpiring, matters of interest to the reader were taking place in another part of the cavern.

Vida Gaines was startled to hear a key fitted into the lock of the door to the chamber in which she was confined, and as the door swung open, she started to her feet.

A cry of mingled surprise and joy burst from her lips as her eyes fell upon a person who entered through the open doorway.

"Father! father!" she exclaimed, with emotion.

"Vida, my daughter!" burst from Bryton Gaines's lips.

He did not attempt to embrace her, for his hands were confined by manacles. And Vida restrained any sudden feeling of affection, when she remembered his usual unfeeling ways; but she quickly advanced to his side, her eyes fastened upon the manacles that burdened his wrists.

"Father, how came you here?" she asked, anxiously. "What means these irons upon your wrists? Are you, too, a prisoner in this place?"

"I regret to say that I am," was the reply. "I was unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of these desperate robbers, and they brought me to this underground cavern. But how came you here? Tell me all about it."

As briefly as possible, Vida told him of her adventures after she was kidnapped by the two ruffians at the back door of the White Hoss Hotel. Bryton Gaines listened without word or comment till she was done, then he spoke more tenderly than she had ever known him.

"Vida, my poor girl, you have indeed been cruelly treated, and if it ever comes within my power those two dastardly wretches shall be fully punished. But even now, I fear that your position is worse than it was in the hands of those creatures who held you for ransom."

"Oh, father! what do you mean?"

"I mean that gold would have purchased your release from their hands," he said, gloomily.

"But will not gold purchase our liberty now?" she asked, with a terrible dread stealing over her.

He slowly shook his head.

"I have offered them all—possess if they would set us free. I have humbled myself to beg their chief to take all my worldly possessions and return us to White Hoss. But he remains obdurate."

"What is to be done?" she sobbed. "What does he expect?"

"He expects more than I would consent to. He found me obstinate and brought me here under guard to let you know the extent of his

demands. The guards have thrust me in here to perform a terrible duty while they wait at the door."

He sunk into a chair in a dejected attitude, his head bowed upon his breast. Bryton Gaines's proud spirit seemed utterly crushed.

The girl knelt at his feet.

"Tell me, father," she pleaded, as she placed her cold, trembling hands upon his, "tell me what this terrible outlaw requires of us."

For several moments the man did not reply, but sat with his head bowed in that dejected attitude. Finally, he lifted his face, and Vida thought she saw a teardrop glisten in his eye.

"The outlaw chief has uttered some terrible threats," he said slowly. "He swears that if you do not comply with his request I shall be hanged before your eyes."

"Oh, don't! don't! don't!" cried Vida wildly. "Don't tell me any more. What is his demand?"

Slowly, as though the words were wrung in agony from the very depths of his soul, Bryton Gaines replied:

"That you become his wife!"

CHAPTER XV.

AN ASTONISHING REVELATION.

A GASPING cry that was half a sob burst from Vida Gaines's lips as she heard her father utter those terrible words. The fact that she had more than half expected to hear such a reply to her question did not soften the shock which it gave her.

For a moment she bowed her face upon her hands which rested upon Bryton Gaines's knee, and her whole frame shook with suppressed emotion. Pen is powerless to describe the keenness of her sufferings.

Bryton Gaines's face was a study. Without doubt a look of compassion and pity rested upon it, but this look was mingled with one of determination. For an instant it actually seemed that a faint smile appeared upon his countenance, but when Vida lifted her eyes, his features were transformed by a look of tenderness and deep sympathy.

"My poor girl," he said softly, as he placed his hands caressingly upon her own. "My heart is wrung with anguish when I see you suffer so much. Perhaps I have not always been as affectionate as a parent should, but within my heart you have always held the first place, in preference to any living person. I realize only too well how this fearful blow must crush you. As for myself, I am utterly humbled and powerless."

"Oh, father! father!" moaned Vida. "Is there no hope? Is there no way but this? Must I pay this fearful price for your release?"

"No, no, my child! While there is life there is hope, and fortune may yet smile upon us. If not—well, then—I can meet my doom like a man."

There was a defiant ring in his voice, and for a moment he lifted his head proudly. The girl looked upon him with growing affection, feeling within her heart that she had never known the secret depths of his soul.

When she spoke there was a firm ring to her voice:

"While there is a ray of hope I will not yield to this inhuman demand. I will beg mercy at the outlaw's feet, but as a last resort, dear father, I will freely sacrifice myself for you."

The man's face seemed to grow whiter and his whole form trembled with suppressed emotion.

"My darling Vida," he murmured, "I do not deserve such devotion as this. I have never been a parent to win a child's devotion, yet you are ready to suffer more than death for my sake. I would to Heaven that I could live over my life since you were a child in my arms. How differently I would shape my course, and how tender I would be to my darling daughter!"

"Don't think of the past, father. I fear that I have sadly misjudged you. It is the future which looks black to me."

"Black, indeed, for should I give up my life for your sake, would it prevent this outlaw from compelling you to become his wife? He would still have you in his power."

"True, true," she announced, with quivering lips. "But never for a moment have I thought of forfeiting your life by utterly refusing to accede to his demand. Should I refuse anything in my power to save you, I would feel as though I had been instrumental in your murder."

She spoke with calmness now, but that calmness was much more terrible than paroxysms of despair would have been. Her lips had become dry and parched and the beating of her heart seemed like the struggles of a living creature

seeking to escape from confinement. Her eyes shone with a steady unnatural light.

But Bryton Gaines did not note these ominous signs. He saw that she was calm and mentally decided that it was the calmness of one who had quietly resigned herself into the hands of Fate. He knew little of the unuttered thoughts within her throbbing brain.

At this moment a sharp rap sounded on the cell door and Bryton Gaines arose to his feet.

"I must go now," he said, slowly, holding out his hands to her. "Good-by, Vida."

She took his hands and said, almost mechanically:

"Where are you going, father?"

"Back to my cell. Be of good cheer, little girl; all may yet end well."

His words did not lift or lighten the load that was crushing her spirit. She felt that there was little hope. Despite the fact that her face was marked by lines of pain, it was yet beautiful, and Bryton Gaines, by a powerful effort only, refrained with difficulty from raining kisses upon her lips. He was still self-possessed, however, and bending forward, touched his lips to her forehead in a tender manner.

The touch of Bryton Gaines's lips seemed to scorch her and Vida half-uttered a little cry. She shrunk away from him for an instant, a strange unaccountable feeling of aversion coming over her.

He noticed her emotion and for a single instant a dark scowl flitted across his face; but when her eyes sought his, only a look of tenderness and sorrow rested upon his beardless face.

"Don't give up all hopes," he admonished, as his eyes fell upon the tray which still bore its dishes of untasted food; "and above all things, eat. You must eat to keep up your strength, for you must be strong if an opportunity of escape appears. Once more, good-by."

With one last lingering look upon her fair face, he turned slowly away. The door swung open and the next moment closed behind his retreating form.

Once outside the cell chamber, Bryton Gaines held up his hands and a man who stood near the door proceeded to relieve him of his manacles. A few moments later he stood free and unfettered.

"Let the preparation for the marriage go on," he commanded. "The Gospel sharp is here, and the thing must be carried through with a rush."

The man bowed and turned hastily away. Bryton Gaines procured a mask from where it hung near the door, and quickly adjusted it over his face. Then he took up a light which sat upon a rocky shelf, and strode swiftly away.

A few minutes later Lucky Luke was startled by hearing a key fitted into the lock of his cell door. The young man sprung up eagerly, half-expecting that his visitor would be the strange outlaw lieutenant. He uttered a sigh of disappointment when the door swung open, and Bryton Gaines, *en masque*, stepped into the cell.

The masked man stopped near the center of the cell, and folding his arms, fixed his eyes on the captain of the Boy Rangers with a steady glare.

Luke returned the look defiantly.

Finally the man spoke.

"Young man," he said, "what is your name?"

Luke could not restrain a laugh of mingled sarcasm and amusement.

"I don't know as that is any of your business," he replied; "but I have no objection to telling you that I am known as Lucky Luke."

"You are known as Lucky Luke—quite true; but what I want to know is your true name—the one given you when a child."

"Really, my masked friend, you are blessed with a good supply of gall. You ask a chap his name, and when he answers, boldly insinuate that he lies. If I ever had another name than Lucky Luke, be sure you will not learn it from my lips."

"It makes little difference. I know your name. Your whole history is known to me, Neil Barlow."

Captain Luke gave a start of surprise as he heard these words. A dark frown settled on his face, and his teeth came together with a sharp click, but he uttered not a word.

"Yes, your whole history is known to me," pursued the mask. "I will give you a few points to show you that I am not lying. To begin:

"Your mother, a handsome young English girl, fell in love with a rather dashing American tourist, and married him, much against her parents' wishes. For a year or more she lived a wandering life with her husband, who for a

time seemed devotedly attached to her. Then she made a startling discovery. She learned that her husband, who had represented himself to be the son of wealthy parents, was in truth a gambler, and made his living by fleecing those less expert with the pasteboards. From the moment of this discovery the constancy of her love was shattered.

"You were born in France, and when less than a year old came to this country with your parents. In New York your father found good fields for exercising his talents with the pasteboards, and his attention to 'business' caused him to be absent from home very much. For a time things went on swimmingly, despite the fact that your parents had frequent quarrels. Money was plenty, and was the pier which supported the shattered bridge of affection. Finally your father went away, and was absent for several weeks. When he returned, he quarreled with your mother, and they parted, she taking you with her.

"It was years after when your father found his wife and child in an Eastern city, living from hand to mouth on the wages she earned in a cotton factory. Your father, Harvey Barlow, was also in hard luck. It seemed that even his best friend, the devil, had turned against him, for try as he might, his former skill with cards was gone. Everything seemed to run against him. He came to your mother to extort money, but she had none for him.

"At this time you were about six years old. For a few weeks your father and mother lived together and then something happened which I fancy you distinctly remember, despite your age."

The mask ceased to speak for an instant, but Luke uttered not a word. He seemed to be staring the man fixedly in the eyes, but in reality he was looking past Bryton Gaines at the grating of the cell door, where for an instant he fancied he had seen a face appear.

The mask continued:

"Harvey Barlow and his wife quarreled. In a paroxysm of anger the man struck the woman a heavy blow with an earthen pitcher, shattering the dish and killing the woman on the spot. When he found that she was really dead, he seized the child, yourself, in his arms and fled. He escaped the police and detectives, who, as the woman was poor and unknown, did not exert themselves as they might. You were placed in the care of a close-mouthed motherly old lady in a quiet town, and your father sought out a woman whom he had falsely married and lived with a part of the time while your mother was alive. By this woman he had already become the father of a daughter, and now he was able to live peacefully with them under a false name. I said peacefully; I meant as peacefully as possible for a man who was often haunted by the vision of a dead, accusing face and hands that held up the hangman's halter before his eyes.

"Within a few years the second wife died and the man of a wild life was left alone in the world with the exception of his children. He had never seen his boy since he placed him in the old woman's care, but he regularly contributed money for little Neil Barlow's support. He now placed his daughter in friendly hands and struck out to make a fortune by fair means or foul.

"Years passed and when Harvey Barlow had partially succeeded in securing the fortune for which he thirsted, he sent for his daughter to join him in a Western home. It was about this time that he learned that his son, Neil, had run away, and that no traces of him could be found. Little cared Harvey Barlow, for his affection for the boy had never been great, and he could not forget that little Neil had witnessed the blow that killed his mother.

"Harvey Barlow's daughter had grown to be a beautiful and talented girl, for he had taken care that the people in whose charge she had been so many years should see to it that she obtained a good education. In the course of time Harvey Barlow and his daughter came to White Horse Camp and there the man is known as Bryton Gaines!"

Lucky Luke sprang to his feet as though electrified, his eyes fairly blazing.

"What's that you say?" he shouted hoarsely.

"Isay that Bryton Gaines is your father," was the calm reply, as the man removed his mask; "and I am Bryton Gaines! Vida, my daughter, is your half-sister!"

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNDERGROUND HUNT.

THE underground cavern used by Captain Cyclone and his followers, as a secret strong-

hold was a marvelous place indeed. Its many winding passages and chambers would have amazed a scientific explorer. Some of these passages were the work of nature; some had been fashioned by the hand of man.

When the cavern was first discovered by its lawless inhabitants, many things were found which led the discoverers to believe that it once had been inhabited by a race of people who were idol-worshippers. In the center of the main chamber of the cavern stood a tall stone image and immediately in front of the image was a stone altar which had evidently once been used for sacrificial purposes. The roof of this chamber could not be seen from the floor, and the smoke of fires which the outlaws sometimes built upon the altar rose steadily upward and vanished in a way which told that there was an outlet somewhere above.

At the time of the discovery of the cavern, several skeletons of human beings were found within one of the chambers and from the formation of the skulls, one of the outlaws, who was a scholar as well as a robber, pronounced them to be the remains of a race similar to the native American Indian.

It made little difference to Captain Cyclone, however, what kind of people had once inhabited the cavern so long as it afforded himself and his band a secure hiding-place. This the cavern had surely done for a time at least. If human beings other than the outlaws found the secret cavern it is probable that few of them lived to tell of it. But Justice nearly always overtakes Crime, no matter how crafty the latter may be.

Perhaps an hour after the revelation made to Lucky Luke by Gaines, half a dozen of the outlaws were gathered in the main chamber of the cavern. Three of these were around a small, square table, engaged in an exciting game of draw-poker. Two of the others were enjoying a smoke and chat. The last of the six, the outlaw lieutenant, was stretched upon a couch of furs, apparently enjoying a quiet nap.

Suddenly from out of a passage into the chamber staggered a half-clothed man. His face and head were covered with blood and his hands were held behind his back by a pair of manacles. As he tottered into the chamber, he uttered a hoarse cry which attracted the attention of every person present. Cries of incredulity burst from the outlaws' lips as they recognized this new-comer.

It was Lieutenant Blizzard himself!

Yet, before their eyes, upon the couch of furs, sat one whom they had believed to be the lieutenant.

As his eyes fell upon the figure on the furs, the genuine lieutenant shouted hoarsely: "Capter that devil! Don't let 'im git erway fer yer lives! He are Barret Dorne, the Border Detective!"

For a moment the outlaws seemed stricken motionless with amazement, when, with a laugh of defiance, the assumed lieutenant sprang up and disappeared like a flash into one of the dark passages.

"After him!" ordered Lieutenant Blizzard. "He mustn't git erway! He has taken a passage that will lead him inter ther very wu'st place he c'u'd go. Curse these irons! If my han's were free I'd lead ther chase."

"We can't run him down in those passages," declared one of the outlaws. "He can throw us by tackin' an' doublin' in five minutes."

"Bring out ther dorgs! Bring out ther dorgs! Lively! Summons every man an' hunt 'im down! Stir yer stumps, you drones!" were the lieutenant's quick and excited commands.

Two or three sprang to obey. One approached their leader.

"I say, leftenant," he ventured, "lemme git them irons offen yer wrists."

"All right, Carl; work lively. I'll give ye fifty dollars if ye'll rip 'em orf within two minutes."

"I can't do it," was the reply, "but I kin bu'st that chain in a short time, if you will cum ter my anvil."

"All right! Anythin' so as I kin use me han's. I want ter git arter that devil. He tuck me by surprise an' knocked me silly. Then he stripped me o' ther rag round me head an' me clothes an' fixed hisself up so that ther Ole Nick c'u'dn't 'a' tole wich war 'im an' wich war I."

"He fooled us all," admitted Carl, as he went to work on the chain. "We never smelt a rat."

At this moment some of the men entered the chamber, holding in leash two fierce-looking hounds. Lieutenant Blizzard laughed coarsely as he saw the brutes.

"Good boys!" he cried. "Putt 'em on his trail! Turn 'em loose!"

A moment later the fugitive detective, who was rapidly making his way along a narrow, winding passage, heard an ominous sound. He stopped and listened. To his ears came the deep bay of the hounds as they took up the scent.

"Heavens!" muttered the fugitive. "Those are bloodhounds! Well, let them come! I have handled such brutes before, and I am not afraid to meet them again. If I am not mistaken, there will be some dead dogs within this cave before a great while."

He calmly proceeded to produce a dark-lantern from beneath his coat and in a moment had lighted it. Then he shot open the slide, and by the aid of the light, pressed onward once more.

Nearer and nearer came the ominous sounds, but still the detective hurried on, looking to the right and left in search for a place from which he could make a defense.

"I'll try some other passage," he muttered, and he turned off into the first passage to which he came.

Onward he hurried, still listening to the dogs and observing that they were rapidly gaining upon him.

As he hurried on, he drew forth a heavy self-acting bull-dog revolver and grasped it firmly, thus preparing to meet the dogs.

"I reckon I am cool enough to perforate the animals and not let them touch me with a tooth," he said, confidently. "If I am not mistaken by the sound, there are only two of them. A couple shots will end their career."

A cry suddenly burst from his lips as the passage came to an abrupt end. He could go no further!

"Got to fight it out here," he gritted; "I don't know as I could find a better place. There is no escape, old man. It looks as though Barret Dorne had run down his last criminal!"

Two large boulders lay close together near the end of the passage. Upon one of these he set the dark lantern in such a manner that the reflection threw the light directly along the passage where the dogs would appear. Then he stepped back into the shadow and waited, revolver in hand.

He did not have long to wait. The sharp, short bark of the dogs told that they were close upon their prey. In a moment they appeared, with frothing mouths and gleaming eyes.

Two or three bounds they made toward the man at bay, then his revolver spoke. There were two heavy, muffled reports and two dogs lay dead with bullets in their brains!

"That settles them," remarked the detective, grimly, as he proceeded to ensconce himself behind the boulders, at the same time removing and closing the dark lantern. "I wish I could dispose of the outlaws as easily."

Silently he waited the appearance of his pursuers, hearing their shouts and cries approaching. Finally they came into view, bearing torches above their heads.

Instantly the detective cried:

"Halt, if you value your lives! I will shoot the first man who advances another step!"

Instantly the outlaws obeyed this command, fierce cries bursting from their lips as the light from the torches showed them the dead dogs.

"The passage is narrow," continued the man at bay, "so that but two can advance abreast. I have a couple of self-acting revolvers here and can lay you out as fast as you come up. I should advise you to use a little judgment in this matter."

The outlaws vouchsafed no reply, but in an instant, at a word of command, the torches were dashed to the floor and extinguished. But the Border Detective had expected such a move as this and instantly shot open the slide of the dark lantern and turned it so that the passage was illumined by the light. Then his revolvers spoke twice, and two of the outlaws, who had attempted to steal forward in the darkness dropped in their tracks with bullets through their legs.

With cries of alarm, the others fell back till they were screened by the shadows.

"Hunt your holes!" cried Barret Dorne. "Don't dare to show even your noses if you do not want them perforated."

The outlaws gathered together for consultation.

"Where is the chief?" demanded one.

"He will be along soon," was the reply. "One of the boys went for him at the start."

The man's words proved true. Fifteen minutes later the repulsive, deformed figure of Captain Cyclone appeared bearing a torch. At once the road-agents gathered around him, one of

their number informing him of the "lay of the land."

Captain Cyclone listened without a word, and when the man had finished, motioned the men to stand back. Without a moment's hesitation, he stepped boldly forward into the light of the detective's lantern, at the same time saying sharply:

"You're in a tight box, Barret Dorne, and may as well surrender."

The outlaw chief's voice's sounded strange and unnatural, but strange to say, not one of the men noticed it.

"Don't know but you are right," replied the detective, from his place of concealment; "but I guess I'll fight it out here."

"You're a fool!" declared the outlaw, bluntly. "If you don't surrender at once, I'll have a keg of powder placed in this passage and we'll bury you beneath ten thousand tons of earth. If you surrender I promise you a fair trial for your life. I'll give you one minute to decide," and the speaker took out his watch.

Sixty seconds sped swiftly away.

"Time's up!" came from the chief's lips, as he closed his watch with a snap. "What's your answer?"

"I will surrender," said the detective, as he arose from behind the boulder, and with up-lifted hands, advanced toward the outlaws.

CHAPTER XVII.

INTO THE STRONGHOLD.

WITH little difficulty, the two outlaws, Bob and Joe, who were flying to escape the wrath of Captain Cyclone when he should discover that Dayton Snare had escaped, succeeded in passing the masked sentinel, on guard near the mouth of the cavern. They were just congratulating themselves upon their easy escape thus far, when they found themselves under the muzzles of the Boy Rangers' rifles.

"Up with your hands!" commanded Tom Dole, in a low tone. "Not a word or a cry! If you make an alarm your doom is sealed!"

The outlaws realized that it was folly to disobey this command, and promptly elevated their hands.

"Up they go, young feller," said Joe, quietly. "You've got us, an' got us foul. Now, w'ot is ther racket?"

"You will find out soon enough," replied Tom. "Bob, relieve these gentlemen of their weapons."

This Bob Swett at once proceeded to do.

"Now, gentlemen," continued Tom, blandly, "I want to ask you a few questions. I presume you belong to Captain Cyclone's Riders."

"We did, young feller," admitted Joe; "but we hev jist severed our connection with the gang an' struck out fer er safer lokality."

A moment's questioning served to draw out the whole story from the two ex-Riders.

"We made up our minds that we wanted ter live er few days longer an' so we vamoosed," said Joe, in conclusion.

"Not only that," put in Bob, "but as fer me, I'm sick o' that kind er life an' want ter git inter other parts whare I kin live like hones' folks."

"Me too," Joe declared.

"W'ot church ye goin' ter j'ine?" grinned Ned Pepper.

"This is no time for attempted levity," put in Tom Dole, sharply. "We must attend to business, and not forget that Captain Luke is a prisoner in this underground hole."

He then turned to the two outlaws and questioned them sharply for a few moments. He soon learned all that they knew concerning Luke's predicament.

"Boys," and Tom turned to his companions, "we must go in there at once. Luke may be in deadly danger this minute. As for this lady," motioning toward the strange veiled woman who had brought them tidings of Luke's capture and who was now sitting on a small boulder near at hand, "she had better remain here until we return—if we ever do."

The woman arose to her feet.

"No," she said, firmly; "I am going with you. I do not care for the danger, and I am armed—see!"

From the folds of her dress she produced two small revolvers with a dexterity which told that she was prepared for a sudden emergency.

"I can use the toys effectively," she averred, "and may be of assistance to you in a sudden emergency. Don't say a word against it; it is useless. I am going with you."

The boys protested, but they soon found their efforts were wasted.

"Very well," assented Tom Dole. "Now for the guard. He must be taken by surprise, so

that he cannot give an alarm, and be overpowered in an instant."

"Never you mind ther guard, my children," laughed a voice near at hand, and a masked man who bore a rifle stepped out into view. "Ther guard are all riot, an don't ye fergit thet."

In an instant the masked man found himself covered by the rifles of the Boy Rangers, and Tom Dole demanded, sternly:

"Who are you?"

"Me? Oh, jiminy crickets! I clean fergot thet this rag entirely kivered my beaucherful phizog. I'm ther grand *pro tem* jist now. Take off ther rag an I'm Little Dan Nubs!"

The pseudo-outlaw removed the mask and disclosed to the astonished boys the face of Dan Nubs, the detective!

"Y'er kinder s'prised I take it," grinned the little detective. "Don' know w'ot ter make o' it. Reckon I'll hev ter clear the cobwebs away frum yer brains. Lissen:

"Thet ole varmint as kalls hisself Ole Bum'shell an' myself run onter a part o' this gang o' outlaws las' night an' run 'em to their hole in there. Then we laid low an' waited our time. When it kum we knocked over the guard, trussed 'im up w' er gag in his mouth an' tucked him away in a secret nook, w'ile I tuck his place an' Ole Bum'shell went rite inter ther hole ter see w'ot he c'u'd diskiver. He are in there som'wares now. I kinder smelled er rat w'en these two coves kem out o' ther hole in sich er hurry an' followed them till they run inter you fellers' arms. Then I lay low an' tuck in ther hull business."

"Good enough so far," said Tom curtly. "Did you see the outlaws carry a young man and a girl in there as prisoners?"

"Betcher boots!" exclaimed little Dan Nubs. "An' she was jist stunnin' good-lookin'. Ole Bum'shell was clean smashed onto her an' swore he'd resky her or leave his karkiss in thet hole."

"Enough said," spoke Tom briskly, his usual lazy drawl having completely vanished. "Luke is in there and we must get him out. The way is open. Let's spend no more time in talk."

It was decided that the two outlaws, Bob and Joe, should guide them into the cave. These individuals protested against the scheme, but Tom Dole was obdurate in enforcing the demand.

Five minutes later the entire band, including Little Dan Nubs and the mysterious veiled woman, were proceeding cautiously along the main passage into the cavern, guided by the outlaws, Bob and Joe. Dan Nubs had informed the two ex-Riders that he was an officer and had promised to use his influence in obtaining a pardon for them, should they guide the party safely into the den.

A terrible storm was about to burst upon the unsuspecting robbers.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE HAND OF JUSTICE.

"EVERYTHING is ready? Let the ceremony proceed."

It was Captain Cyclone who spoke. By the side of the repulsive-appearing outlaw chief stood Vida Gaines, her fair face marked by a desperate look of determination. Evidently she had given up all hopes and decided to marry the chief of the outlaws that she might save her father from a terrible doom. In front of them, near at hand, stood a dark-clothed, clerical-looking man.

The chamber was brilliantly lighted and nearly the entire band had gathered to witness the marriage. At the command of the chief, Barret Dorne, the unfortunate detective who had fallen into the outlaws' hands, had been brought into the chamber that he might witness the ceremony. He now reclined upon a couch of furs, a merry twinkle in his eyes, despite his surroundings.

As Captain Cyclone's words smote upon Lieutenant Blizzard's ears, that person started sharply and looked suspiciously at the chief. Then he shook his head slowly, with a puzzled air.

Not a sign of a weapon was visible upon any of the outlaws. At the chief's command they had left their weapons in the arsenal, as one of the chambers was called. He had requested them to do this, so that the girl might not be alarmed by a display of firearms.

As the preparations for the marriage were going on, the outlaw chief whispered in Vida's ear once or twice.

Finally everything was ready and the dark-

clothed outlaw advanced to do his duty. Captain Cyclone seized Vida's hand and held it, despite the girl's faint struggles to escape. Then the ceremony began.

Began—to be interrupted by a thrilling challenge:

"Hands up, every man! The one who refuses dies! You are surrounded and in our power!"

The sharp click of weapons being cocked sounded on every side and dark forms appeared at the mouths of several passages.

Lieutenant Blizzard uttered a terrible oath and snatched out a weapon from where he had hidden it within an inner pocket; but ere the desperate man could fire a shot, a revolver exploded in Captain Cyclone's hand and the lieutenant fell headlong.

"Throw up your hands, men," commanded the chief. "Don't dare to disobey me!"

Awed by this command and not daring to disobey, being disarmed, the astounded outlaws put up their hands. Then the Boy Rangers sprung into the chamber and within ten minutes had secured the outlaw band.

They did not need to bind the chief, for of his own accord he removed the horrible flesh-like mask from his face and—*Lucky Luke stood revealed!*

A joyful shout went up from the Boy Rangers as their eyes once more beheld their beloved captain.

With characteristic promptness, Little Dan Nubs had relieved Barret Dorne of the cords which bound him, and the Border Detective was once more free, none the worse for his recent exciting adventure.

Then the little detective turned his attention toward Lieutenant Blizzard, whom he found unconscious from the effects of the bullet from Captain Luke's revolver, which had grazed his skull, but left him far from dead. Dan Nubs quickly secured the outlaw lieutenant by snapping a pair of handcuffs upon his wrists.

Meanwhile Lucky Luke had conducted Vida to the couch of furs lately deserted by Barret Dorne, where the girl was now reclining, half-unconscious from the effects of the excitement through which she had just passed.

Then Luke turned toward those who had participated in the capture of the outlaws.

"Perhaps some are surprised to find that I have been masquerading as the outlaw chief," he said. "I can explain everything in a moment. Less than two hours ago a person came to my cell, and told me that he was my father. He also told me other things which made me furious. I sprung upon him in my anger, but would have been badly treated had I not received assistance from this gentleman," pointing toward Barret Dorne. "He had dogged the outlaw and remained just without the cell door during the interview. At an opportune moment he came to my aid and we took the man prisoner. Then, through fear of losing his life, he was forced to reveal various secrets of this underground den. He told us who was the chief of the outlaws, and how he succeeded in concealing his identity beneath this horrible disguise. This hump upon my back is easily arranged, but this mask in my hand is a piece of wonderful ingenuity. It is soft, thin and flexible, and when adjusted, fits like a glove and looks like genuine flesh. As for the red wig, that is one of the simplest parts of the disguise."

"From the lips of the man whom we took prisoner, we learned how to obtain this rig, and it was decided that I should attempt to personate Captain Cyclone. It was a bold stroke, but our situation was desperate. While I was gone for the disguise, the real lieutenant appeared and denounced the one who had thus far successfully deceived the outlaws. Then ensued a chase through these underground passages. Finally my friend was cornered, and was making a desperate fight when I appeared, disguised as Captain Cyclone, and demanded his surrender. He dropped to the trick and gave himself up, knowing that I would do everything in my power to release him. I had not completed my plans when you appeared and interrupted the little farce, which was being carried through according to previous arrangement. Everything worked as nicely as though it had been carefully planned."

"I reckon the hand of Providence had something to do with the work done in the last few hours," said Barret Dorne, gravely. "Anyway, Captain Cyclone, the man of many crimes is captured at last and in my power."

"And I hev jist clapped ther darbies onto Ben Breeze," put in Little Dan Nubs. "Ther hull gang o' measly robbers are captered. This is a big scoop, by ther pride o' Solomon!"

"But where is Old Bombshell?" demanded Tom Dole. "You said he was in here."

"Ghost o' ther Pan Handle!" exclaimed Barret Dorne. "Don't ye know this ole Lisbon yarthquake? Waal, by ther Roman gods!"

A chorus of exclamations burst from the lips of the Boy Rangers. They could scarcely believe their senses.

"Yes," said the Border Detective, in answer to a question, "I am Old Bombshell. That is one of my disguises, and one in which I have become pretty well known. In fact, a little too well known."

After a few moments more of conversation, it was decided to bring Captain Cyclone to the chamber where the capture had taken place. Five minutes later, with totering steps, Bryton Gaines entered the chamber, escorted between Barret Dorne and Tom Dole. His hands were confined by manacles.

"There," cried Lucky Luke, pointing straight at the magnate of White Hoss, "there is the chief of the outlaws!"

"My father!" shrieked Vida Gaines.

"He is not your father!" declared Lucky Luke. "He confessed that he was not!"

The strange veiled woman who had entered the cavern with the Boy Rangers now darted swiftly forward and confronted Bryton Gaines.

"Harvey Barlow," she cried, as she tore away the veil which concealed her face. "I am here for vengeance! What have you done with my boy?"

Uttering a shriek of horror, the miserable man sunk to the ground.

"The dead alive!" he groaned, as he covered his eyes with his manacled hands. "Just God, this is retribution!"

"Listen, Harvey Barlow," commanded the woman, as she bent over him. "That blow which you struck years ago did not kill me as you supposed, only knocked me insensible for a time and deprived me of reason. For long years I have been searching for you and my boy. I have found you, but where is little Neil?"

"Here, mother!"

It was Lucky Luke who spoke in tremulous tones and the next moment mother and son were clasped in each other's arms.

Vida Gaines knelt by the side of him whom she had known so many years as her parent.

"Father," she cried, "what does this mean?"

"Don't touch me, child!" shrieked the wretched man, as he shrunk from her. "I am not your father, although you have known me as such. Your true father is confined within a cell in this cavern, as is also your mother, who is a maniac, made so by my sin-cursed hand!"

Out of one of the passages advanced two forms—a man and a woman. The man was Dayton Snare; the woman the raging maniac whom he had found confined in one of those terrible underground cells.

"She is a maniac no longer, Ralph Roberts," declared Dayton Snare. "The sight of me, her lawful husband, who for twenty long years has thought her dead, has restored her reason. Vida, you are my own dear daughter, and this woman is your long lost mother!"

Pen is powerless to describe the scenes that followed within the outlaws' cavern.

Vivian Crafton, the wife of Dayton Snare, whose true name was Cyrus Crafton, was indeed alive. The body found floating in Boston Harbor and supposed to have been hers must have been that of some other unfortunate who resembled her closely. Feeling greatly wronged by her husband, the unhappy woman had not returned to Amesburg for more than a month after her separation from him. When she did so she was recognized by no one, and then learned that her husband had gone, none knew whither. With a heavy heart, she had started to search for him, resolved never to return to her home until she found him.

It was years later that Ralph Roberts found Vivian Crafton living in a small Eastern city, supporting herself and her daughter, who was born after the separation occurred, by doing needlework. At that time Roberts supposed himself to be the murderer of the fair English girl whom he had induced to become his wife. This fact did not deter him from once more paying his attentions to the woman whom he had dearly loved in Auld Lang Syne.

For a time Mrs. Crafton accepted his attentions as gracefully as possible, but she finally became disgusted with him and bade him leave her forever. This he refused to do, and becoming more determined in his purpose, had caused her to be incarcerated in a private mad-house, where he had kept her for years, taking charge of Vida, her daughter, the while. Finally, as

she remained obstinate, Ralph Roberts's affection for her grew less and less, till at last he would not have married her had she consented.

When Ralph Roberts, as Captain Cyclone, came to the vicinity of White Hoss with his band, he had caused Mrs. Crafton to be removed from the private mad-house and brought to the underground den which one of his band had discovered. There, in the cell where she was confined, the woman had in reality become insane, under her mental tortures, only to have her reason restored by the sight of her husband, whom long years before she had given up as dead.

Ralph Roberts's scheme to make the beautiful Vida his wife, by marrying her as Captain Cyclone, and afterward revealing to her that she was not his daughter, had been thwarted at the moment when success seemed certain.

Ralph Roberts did not live to leave the underground cavern. In some manner he obtained possession of a vial of poison, and swallowed its deadly contents. He died in great agony, after making a full confession of his many crimes, among which was the robbery of the Amesburg Bank. But, Barret Dorne was not cheated out of his reward, for it was offered for the man's capture, dead or alive.

Little Dan Nubs succeeded in carrying Ben Breeze back to Illinois, where he was badly "wanted."

Sixteen of the captured outlaws received a full dose of border justice at the hands of the citizens of White Hoss, into whose custody they were delivered by the Boy Rangers. Of the whole band, only Bob and Joe, the two outlaws who led the Boy Rangers into the cavern, escaped the hand of justice. They were released in fulfillment of Little Dan Nubs's promise, and in other parts, far from the vicinity of White Hoss, are endeavoring to win the respect and confidence of their fellow-men by leading honest lives.

The Boy Rangers no longer exist, having disbanded soon after the loss of their captain, who married handsome Vida Roberts, and went into business in a Western city. His mother, the mysterious veiled lady, has a comfortable home with her manly son, of whom she is justly proud.

Cyrus Crafton and his wife, both of whom have tasted the bitterest dregs of the cup of sorrow, now reunited, are living happy and contented, striving to forget the dark shadows which hung over their lives for so many years.

Tough Tom and Rough Dave, the kidnappers never showed their faces again in White Hoss, but they are sometimes heard of in other parts, and it is safe to predict that their career will eventually end in some violent manner.

Barret Dorne, the Border Detective, with his horse and dog, still roams the West, a veritable terror to evil-doers. Sometimes he meets Little Dan Nubs and they speak of their "big scoop" when "Captain Cyclone" and his entire band were taken prisoners, almost without resistance.

THE END.

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